NEAL SHUSTERMAN

Unwind UNBOXED

INCLUDES

Unwind

UnStrung
AN *UNWIND* STORY

UnWholly

Contents

Unwind

Acknowledgments
The Bill of Life
Part One: Triplicate
- Chapter 1: Connor
- Chapter 2: Risa
- Chapter 3: Lev
- Chapter 4: Connor
- Chapter 5: Cop
- Chapter 6: Lev
- Chapter 7: Connor
- Chapter 8: Risa

Part Two: Storked
- Chapter 9: Mother
- Chapter 10: Risa
- Chapter 11: Connor
- Chapter 12: Risa
- Chapter 13: Lev
- Chapter 14: Connor
- Chapter 15: Lev
- Chapter 16: Teacher
- Chapter 17: Risa
- Chapter 18: Lev
- Chapter 19: Connor
- Chapter 20: Risa

Part Three: Transit
- Chapter 21: Lev
- Chapter 22: Risa

Chapter 23: Connor
Chapter 24: Risa
Chapter 25: Connor

Part Four: Destinations
Chapter 26: Pawnbroker
Chapter 27: Connor
Chapter 28: Risa
Chapter 29: Lev
Chapter 30: Cy-Ty
Chapter 31: Lev

Part Five: Graveyard
Chapter 32: The Admiral
Chapter 33: Risa
Chapter 34: Connor
Chapter 35: Lev
Chapter 36: Risa
Chapter 37: Emby and the Admiral
Chapter 38: Mob
Chapter 39: Roland
Chapter 40: Connor
Chapter 41: Mob
Chapter 42: Risa
Chapter 43: Mob
Chapter 44: Connor
Chapter 45: Mob
Chapter 46: Connor
Chapter 47: First-Year Residents
Chapter 48: Risa
Chapter 49: Roland
Chapter 50: Connor

Part Six: Unwound
Chapter 51: Camp
Chapter 52: Risa

Chapter 53: Connor
Chapter 54: Lev
Chapter 55: Risa
Chapter 56: Connor
Chapter 57: Lev
Chapter 58: Connor
Chapter 59: Roland
Chapter 60: Harvest
Chapter 61: Roland
Chapter 62: Lev
Chapter 63: Guard
Chapter 64: Connor
Chapter 65: Clappers

Part 7: Consciousness
Chapter 66: Connor
Chapter 67: Risa
Chapter 68: Lev
Chapter 69: Unwinds

About the Author

Unstrung

Chapter 1: Lev
Chapter 2: Wil
Chapter 3: Lev
Chapter 4: Wil
Chapter 5: Lev
Chapter 6: Wil
Chapter 7: Lev
Chapter 8: Wil
Chapter 9: Lev
Chapter 10: Wil
Chapter 11: Una
About Neal Schusterman and Michelle Knowlden

UnWholly

Acknowledgments

Part One: Violations
- Chapter 1: Starkey
- Chapter 2: Miracolina
- Chapter 3: Cam

Part Two: Whollies
- Chapter 4: Parents
- Chapter 5: Connor
- Chapter 6: Risa
- Chapter 7: Connor
- Chapter 8: Risa
- Chapter 9: Connor
- Chapter 10: Starkey

Part Three: Windows of the Soul
- Chapter 11: Smoker
- Chapter 12: Nelson
- Chapter 13: Connor
- Chapter 14: Dolores
- Chapter 15: Connor
- Chapter 16: Risa
- Chapter 17: Cam
- Chapter 18: Risa
- Chapter 19: Cam
- Chapter 20: Nelson

Part Four: Leviathan
- Chapter 21: Lev
- Chapter 22: Trust
- Chapter 23: Lev
- Chapter 24: Miracolina
- Chapter 25: Lev

Chapter 26: Miracolina
Chapter 27: Lev
Chapter 28: Risa
Chapter 29: Cam
Chapter 30: Nelson
Chapter 31: Miracolina
Chapter 32: Lev
Chapter 33: Miracolina
Chapter 34: Lev
Chapter 35: Nelson

Part Five: Matters of Necessity
Chapter 36: Connor
Chapter 37: Risa
Chapter 38: Hayden
Chapter 39: Connor
Chapter 40: Starkey
Chapter 41: Connor
Chapter 42: Starkey
Chapter 43: Avalanche
Chapter 44: Risa
Chapter 45: Cam
Chapter 46: Risa
Chapter 47: Audience
Chapter 48: Risa
Chapter 49: Cam
Chapter 50: Risa
Chapter 51: Cam

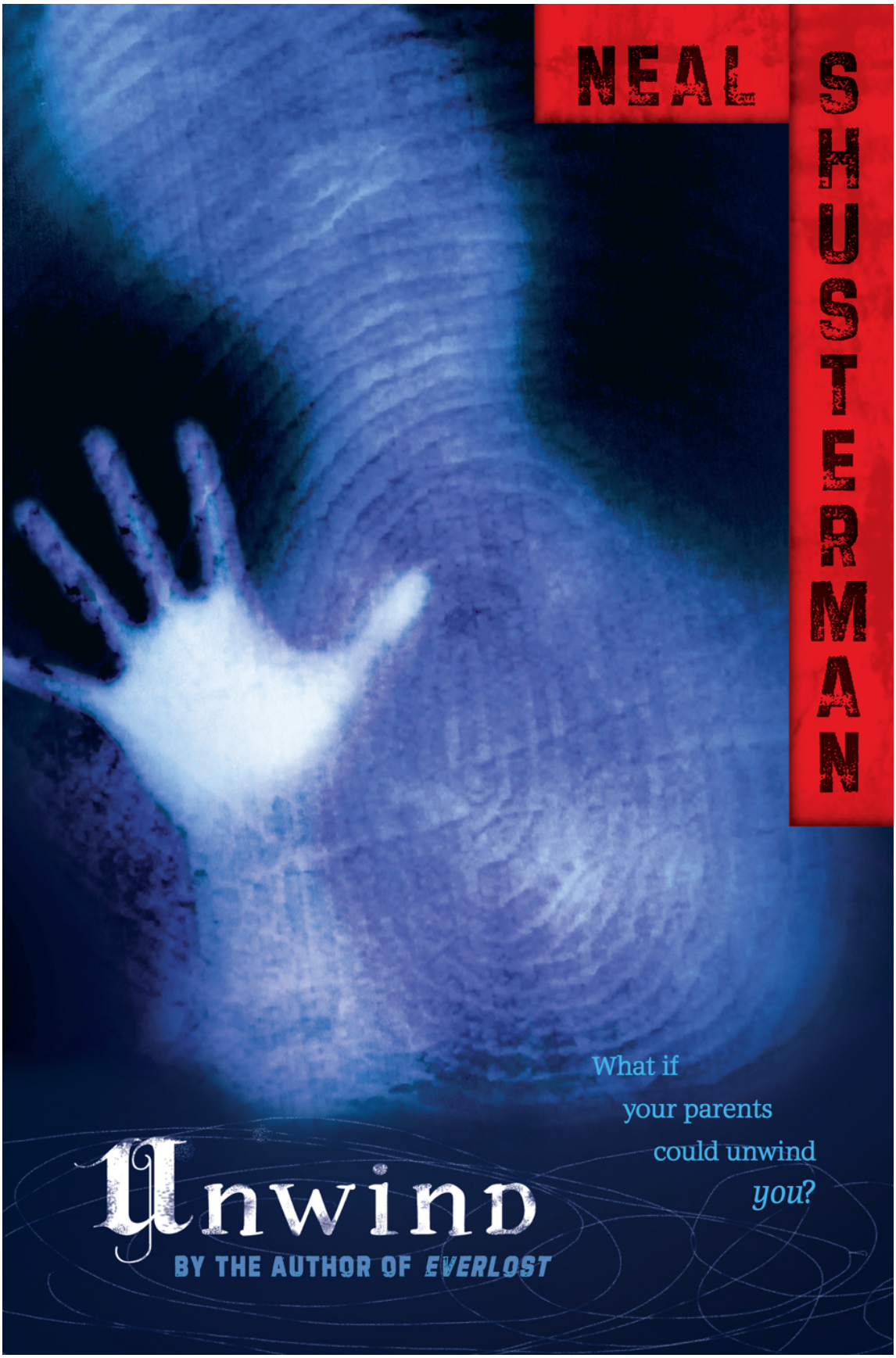
Part Six: Fight or Flight
Chapter 52: Lev
Chapter 53: Nelson
Chapter 54: Lev
Chapter 55: Miracolina
Chapter 56: Lev
Chapter 57: Connor

Chapter 58: Trace
Chapter 59: Lev
Chapter 60: Starkey
Chapter 61: Noah
Chapter 62: Starkey
Chapter 63: Trace
Chapter 64: Lev
Chapter 65: Nelson
Chapter 66: Gate Guard
Chapter 67: Connor
Chapter 68: Vessels
Chapter 69: Lev
Chapter 70: Nelson
Chapter 71: Lev
Chapter 72: Starkey
Chapter 73: Risa
Chapter 74: Roberta
Chapter 75: Cam

Part Seven: Landings
Chapter 76: Dreamliner
Chapter 77: Starkey
Chapter 78: Trace
Chapter 79: Starkey
Chapter 80: Miracolina
Chapter 81: Hayden
Chapter 82: Connor
Chapter 83: Nelson
Chapter 84: Connor

About Neal Shusterman

OceanofPDF.com


NEAL
SHUSTERMAN
What if
your parents
could unwind
you?
Unwind
BY THE AUTHOR OF EVERLOST

OceanofPDF.com

Unwind

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Neal Shusterman

NOVELS:

Antsy Does Time
Bruiser
The Dark Side of Nowhere
Dissidents
Downsiders
The Eyes of Kid Midas
Full Tilt
The Schwa Was Here
The Shadow Club
The Shadow Club Rising
Speeding Bullet
Unwind
UnWholly
What Daddy Did

THE SKINJACKER TRILOGY

Everlost
Everwild
Everfound

THE STAR SHARDS CHRONICLES

Scorpion Shards
Thief of Souls
Shattered Sky

THE DARK FUSION SERIES

Dread Locks
Red Rider's Hood
Duckling Ugly

STORY COLLECTIONS:
Darkness Creeping
MindQuakes
MindStorms
MindBenders

Visit the author at:
storyman.com
and
Facebook.com/nealshusterman

OceanofPDF.com

Neal Shusterman

Unwind

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

New York London Toronto Sydney

OceanofPDF.com

SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com
This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
Copyright © 2007 by Neal Shusterman
All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.
SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Book design by Al Cetta
The text for this book is set in Fairfield
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Shusterman, Neal.
Unwind / Neal Shusterman.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Summary: In a future world where those between the ages of thirteen and eighteen can have their lives "unwound" and their body parts harvested for use by others, three teens go to extreme lengths to uphold their beliefs—and, perhaps, save their own lives.
ISBN: 978-1-4169-1204-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN: 978-1-4169-1205-7 (pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-4169-9496-1 (eBook)
[1. Fugitives from justice—Fiction. 2. Survival—Fiction. 3. Revolutionaries—Fiction. 4. Science fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.S55987Unw 2007
[Fic]—dc22
2006032689

OceanofPDF.com

Dedicated to the memory
of Barbara Seranella

"If more people had been organ donors
Unwinding never would have happened."
—*THE ADMIRAL*

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

When it comes to a novel, the sum of the parts are sometimes greater than the whole. This book could not have been possible without my editor, David Gale, who challenged me to make this book the best it could be. In fact, I owe a debt of gratitude to everyone at Simon & Schuster, not just for their support of this book, but for being so supportive of all my work.

Thanks to my kids, Brendan, Jarrod, Joelle, and Erin, for being the kind of wonderful kids no one would ever unwind—and a special thanks to Jarrod, who not only created my MySpace page, but pre-read *Unwind* and gave me a set of brilliant editorial notes that substantially helped me with early drafts even before the manuscript went to the publisher.

Thanks to Haidy Fisher and her son, Cyrus, who came up with the name CyFi, and let me borrow it for one of my favorite characters.

To my writing group, the Fictionaires, for their constant insight, as well as Trumanell Maples and Leigh Ann Jones, media specialists extraordinaire, who helped immensely as I was working through my second draft.

To Steve Layne, who, when I told him this idea, sat me down and said "You MUST write this book."

Thanks to my assistant, Brandi Lomeli, for being my brain.

I'd like to thank Justin Sewell of despair.com (one of the funniest websites I've ever seen) for allowing me to reference their "demotivational" poster on "Ambition."

I'd also like to thank Charles Pamment of the BBC, Jim Bremner and Joe Zentner of desertusa.com, and Dave Finn, for their help with the factual info between sections. The soul for sale on eBay, and the response is real. The airplane graveyard exists—and the chilling story of the Ukrainian babies taken for their parts is true, proving that fiction is all too often one rationalization away from reality.

OceanofPDF.com

The Bill of Life

The Second Civil War, also known as “The Heartland War,” was a long and bloody conflict fought over a single issue.

To end the war, a set of constitutional amendments known as “The Bill of Life” was passed.

It satisfied both the Pro-life and the Pro-choice armies.

The Bill of Life states that human life may not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen.

However, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a parent may choose to retroactively “abort” a child . . .

. . . on the condition that the child’s life doesn’t “technically” end.

The process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called “unwinding.”

Unwinding is now a common, and accepted practice in society.

OceanofPDF.com

Part One

Triplicate

"I was never going to amount to much anyway, but now, statistically speaking, there's a better chance that some part of me will go on to greatness somewhere in the world. I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless."

—*Samson Ward*

OceanofPDF.com

1 · Connor

"There are places you can go," Ariana tells him, "and a guy as smart as you has a decent chance of surviving to eighteen."

Connor isn't so sure, but looking into Ariana's eyes makes his doubts go away, if only for a moment. Her eyes are sweet violet with streaks of gray. She's such a slave to fashion—always getting the newest pigment injection the second it's in style. Connor was never into that. He's always kept his eyes the color they came in. Brown. He never even got tattoos, like so many kids get these days when they're little. The only color on his skin is the tan it takes during the summer, but now, in November, that tan has long faded. He tries not to think about the fact that he'll never see the summer again. At least not as Connor Lassiter. He still can't believe that his life is being stolen from him at sixteen.

Ariana's violet eyes begin to shine as they fill with tears that flow down her cheeks when she blinks. "Connor, I'm so sorry." She holds him, and for a moment it seems as if everything is okay, as if they are the only two people on Earth. For that instant, Connor feels invincible, untouchable . . . but she lets go, the moment passes, and the world around him returns. Once more he can feel the rumble of the freeway beneath them, as cars pass by, not knowing or caring that he's here. Once more he is just a marked kid, a week short of unwinding.

The soft, hopeful things Ariana tells him don't help now. He can barely hear her over the rush of traffic. This place where they hide from the world is one of those dangerous places that make adults shake their heads, grateful that their own kids aren't stupid enough to hang out on the ledge of a freeway overpass. For Connor it's not about stupidity, or even rebellion—it's about feeling life. Sitting on this ledge, hidden behind an exit sign is where he feels most comfortable. Sure, one false step and he's roadkill. Yet for Connor, life on the edge is home.

There have been no other girls he's brought here, although he hasn't told Ariana that. He closes his eyes, feeling the vibration of the traffic as if it's pulsing through his veins, a part of him. This has always been a good place to get away from fights with his parents, or when he just feels generally boiled. But now Connor's beyond boiled—even beyond fighting with his mom and dad. There's nothing more to fight about. His parents signed the order—it's a done deal.

"We should run away," Ariana says. "I'm fed up with everything, too. My family, school, everything. I could kick-AWOL, and never look back."

Connor hangs on the thought. The idea of kicking-AWOL by himself terrifies him. He might put up a tough front, he might act like the bad boy at school—but running away on his own? He doesn't even know if he has the guts. But if Ariana comes, that's different. That's not alone. "Do you mean it?"

Ariana looks at him with her magical eyes. "Sure. Sure I do. I could leave here. If you asked me."

Connor knows this is major. Running away with an Unwind—*that's* commitment. The fact that she would do it moves him beyond words. He kisses her, and in spite of everything going on in his life Connor suddenly feels like the luckiest guy in the world. He holds her—maybe a little too tightly, because she starts to squirm. It just makes him want to hold her even more tightly, but he fights that urge and lets go. She smiles at him.

"AWOL . . ." she says. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"It's an old military term or something," Connor says. "It means 'absent without leave.'"

Ariana thinks about it, and grins. "Hmm. More like 'alive without lectures.'"

Connor takes her hand, trying hard not to squeeze it too tightly. She said she'd go if he asked her. Only now does he realize he hasn't actually asked yet.

"Will you come with me, Ariana?"

Ariana smiles and nods. "Sure," she says. "Sure I will."

* * *

Ariana's parents don't like Connor. "We always knew he'd be an Unwind," he can just hear them saying. "You should have stayed away from that Lassiter boy." He was never "Connor" to them. He was always "that Lassiter boy." They think that just because he's been in and out of disciplinary school they have a right to judge him.

Still, when he walks her home that afternoon, he stops short of her door, hiding behind a tree as she goes inside. Before he heads home, he thinks how hiding is now going to be a way of life for both of them.

* * *

Home.

Connor wonders how he can call the place he lives home, when he's about to be evicted—not just from the place he sleeps, but from the hearts of those who are supposed to love him.

His father sits in a chair, watching the news as Connor enters.

"Hi, Dad."

His father points at some random carnage on the news. "Clappers again."

"What did they hit this time?"

"They blew up an Old Navy in the North Akron mall."

"Hmm," says Connor. "You'd think they'd have better taste."

"I don't find that funny."

Connor's parents don't know that Connor knows he's being unwound. He wasn't supposed to find out, but Connor has always been good at ferreting out secrets. Three weeks ago, while looking for a stapler in his dad's home office, he found airplane tickets to the Bahamas. They were going on a family vacation over Thanksgiving. One problem, though: There were only three tickets. His mother, his father, his younger brother. No ticket for him. At first he just figured the ticket was somewhere else, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed wrong. So Connor went looking a little deeper when his parents were out, and he found it. The Unwind order. It had been signed in old-fashioned triplicate. The white copy was already gone—off with the authorities. The yellow copy would accompany Connor to his end, and the pink would stay with his parents, as evidence of what

they'd done. Perhaps they would frame it and hang it alongside his first-grade picture.

The date on the order was the day before the Bahamas trip. He was going off to be unwound, and they were going on vacation to make themselves feel better about it. The unfairness of it had made Connor want to break something. It had made him want to break a lot of things—but he hadn't. For once he had held his temper, and aside from a few fights in school that weren't his fault, he kept his emotions hidden. He kept what he knew to himself. Everyone knew that an unwind order was irreversible, so screaming and fighting wouldn't change a thing. Besides, he found a certain power in knowing his parents' secret. Now the blows he could deal them were so much more effective. Like the day he brought flowers home for his mother and she cried for hours. Like the B-plus he brought home on a science test. Best grade he ever got in science. He handed it to his father, who looked at it, the color draining from his face. "See, Dad, my grades are getting better. I could even bring my science grade up to an A by the end of the semester." An hour later his father was sitting in a chair, still clutching the test in his hand, and staring blankly at the wall.

Connor's motivation was simple: Make them suffer. Let them know for the rest of their lives what a horrible mistake they made.

But there was no sweetness to this revenge, and now, three weeks of rubbing it in their faces has made him feel no better. In spite of himself he's starting to feel bad for his parents, and he hates that he feels that way.

"Did I miss dinner?"

His father doesn't look away from the TV. "Your mother left a plate for you."

Connor heads off toward the kitchen, but halfway there he hears:

"Connor?"

He turns to see his father looking at him. Not just looking, but staring. *He's going to tell me now,* Connor thinks. *He's going to tell me they're unwinding me, and then break down in tears, going on and on about how sorry sorry sorry he is about it all.* If he does, Connor just might accept the apology. He might even forgive him, and then tell

him that he doesn't plan to be here when the Juvey-cops come to take him away. But in the end all his father says is, "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"I'll do it now."

Connor locks the door, then goes to his room, no longer hungry for whatever it is his mother saved for him.

* * *

At two in the morning Connor dresses in black and fills a backpack with the things that really matter to him. He still has room for three changes of clothes. He finds it amazing, when it comes down to it, how few things are worth taking. Memories, mostly. Reminders of a time before things went so wrong between him and his parents. Between him and the rest of the world.

Connor peeks in on his brother, thinks about waking him to say good-bye, then decides it's not a good idea. He silently slips out into the night. He can't take his bike, because he had installed an antitheft tracking device. Connor never considered that he might be the one stealing it. Ariana has bikes for both of them though.

Ariana's house is a twenty-minute walk, if you take the conventional route. Suburban Ohio neighborhoods never have streets that go in straight lines, so instead he takes the more direct route, through the woods, and makes it there in ten.

The lights in Ariana's house are off. He expected this. It would have been suspicious if she had stayed awake all night. Better to pretend she's sleeping, so she won't alert any suspicion. He keeps his distance from the house. Ariana's yard and front porch are equipped with motion-sensor lights that come on whenever anything moves into range. They're meant to scare off wild animals and criminals. Ariana's parents are convinced that Connor is both.

He pulls out his phone and dials the familiar number. From where he stands in the shadows at the edge of the backyard he can hear it ring in her room upstairs. Connor disconnects quickly and ducks farther back into the shadows, for fear that Ariana's parents might be

looking out from their windows. What is she thinking? Ariana was supposed to leave her phone on vibrate.

He makes a wide arc around the edge of the backyard, wide enough not to set off the lights, and although a light comes on when he steps onto the front porch, only Ariana's bedroom faces that way. She comes to the door a few moments later, opening it not quite wide enough for her to come out or for him to go in.

"Hi, are you ready?" asks Connor. Clearly she's not; she wears a robe over satin pajamas. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"No, no, I didn't forget. . . ."

"So hurry up! The sooner we get out of here, the more of a lead we'll get before anyone knows we're gone."

"Connor," she says, "here's the thing . . ."

And the truth is right there in her voice, in the way it's such a strain for her to even say his name, the quiver of apology lingering in the air like an echo. She doesn't have to say anything after that, because he knows, but he lets her say it anyway. Because he sees how hard it is for her, and he wants it to be. He wants it to be the hardest thing she's ever done in her life.

"Connor, I really want to go, I do . . . but it's just a really bad time for me. My sister's getting married, and you know she picked me to be the maid of honor. And then there's school."

"You hate school. You said you'd be dropping out when you turn sixteen."

"*Testing* out," she says. "There's a difference."

"So you're not coming?"

"I want to, I really, *really* want to . . . but I can't."

"So everything we talked about was just a lie."

"No," says Ariana. "It was a dream. Reality got in the way, that's all. And running away doesn't solve anything."

"Running away is the only way to save my life," Connor hisses. "I'm about to be unwound, in case you forgot."

She gently touches his face. "I know," she says. "But I'm not."

Then a light comes on at the top of the stairs, and reflexively Ariana closes the door a few inches.

"Ari?" Connor hears her mother say. "What is it? What are you doing at the door?"

Connor backs up out of view, and Ariana turns to look up the stairs. "Nothing, Mom. I thought I saw a coyote from my window and I just wanted to make sure the cats weren't out."

"The cats are upstairs, honey. Close the door and go back to bed."

"So, I'm a coyote," says Connor.

"Shush," says Ariana, closing the door until there's just a tiny slit and all he can see is the edge of her face and a single violet eye. "You'll get away, I know you will. Call me once you're somewhere safe." Then she closes the door.

Connor stands there for the longest time, until the motion sensor light goes out. Being alone had not been part of his plan, but he realizes it should have been. From the moment his parents signed those papers, Connor was alone.

* * *

He can't take a train; he can't take a bus. Sure, he has enough money, but nothing's leaving until morning, and by then they'll be looking for him in all the obvious places. Unwinds on the run are so common these days, they have whole teams of Juvey-cops dedicated to finding them. The police have it down to an art.

He knows he'd be able to disappear in a city, because there are so many faces, you never see the same one twice. He knows he can also disappear in the country, where people are so few and far between; he could set up house in an old barn and no one would think to look. But then, Connor figures the police probably thought of that. They probably have every old barn set up to spring like a rat trap, snaring kids like him. Or maybe he's just being paranoid. No, Connor knows his situation calls for justified caution—not just tonight, but for the next two years. Then once he turns eighteen, he's home free. After that, sure, they can throw him in jail, they can put him on trial—but they can't unwind him. Surviving that long is the trick.

Down by the interstate there's a rest stop where truckers pull off the road for the night. This is where Connor goes. He figures he can

slip in the back of an eighteen-wheeler, but he quickly learns that truckers keep their cargo locked. He curses himself for not having forethought enough to consider that. Thinking ahead has never been one of Connor's strong points. If it was, he might not have gotten into the various situations that have plagued him over these past few years. Situations that got him labels like "troubled" and "at risk," and finally this last label, "unwind."

There are about twenty parked trucks, and a brightly lit diner where half a dozen truckers eat. It's 3:30 in the morning. Apparently truckers have their own biological clocks. Connor watches and waits. Then, at about a quarter to four, a police cruiser pulls silently into the truck stop. No lights, no siren. It slowly circles the lot like a shark. Connor thinks he can hide, until he sees a second police car pulling in. There are too many lights over the lot for Connor to hide in shadows, and he can't bolt without being seen in the bright moonlight. A patrol car comes around the far end of the lot. In a second its headlights will be on him, so he rolls beneath a truck and prays the cops haven't seen him.

He watches as the patrol car's wheels slowly roll past. On the other side of the eighteen-wheeler the second patrol car passes in the opposite direction. *Maybe this is just a routine check,* he thinks. *Maybe they're not looking for me.* The more he thinks about it, the more he convinces himself that's the case. They can't know he's gone yet. His father sleeps like a log, and his mother never checks on Connor during the night anymore.

Still, the police cars circle.

From his spot beneath the truck Connor sees the driver's door of another eighteen-wheeler open. No—it's not the driver's door, it's the door to the little bedroom behind the cab. A trucker emerges, stretches, and heads toward the truckstop bathrooms, leaving the door ajar.

In the hairbreadth of a moment, Connor makes a decision and bolts from his hiding spot, racing across the lot to that truck. Loose gravel skids out from under his feet as he runs. He doesn't know where the cop cars are anymore, but it doesn't matter. He has committed himself

to this course of action and he has to see it through. As he nears the door he sees headlights arcing around, about to turn toward him. He pulls open the door to the truck's sleeper, hurls himself inside, and pulls the door closed behind him.

He sits on a bed not much bigger than a cot, catching his breath. What's his next move? The trucker will be back. Connor has about five minutes if he's lucky, one minute if he's not. He peers beneath the bed. There's space down there where he can hide, but it's blocked by two duffle bags full of clothes. He could pull them out, squeeze in, and pull the duffle bags back in front of him. The trucker would never know he's there. But even before he can get the first duffle bag out, the door swings open. Connor just stands there, unable to react as the trucker reaches in to grab his jacket and sees him.

"Whoa! Who are you? What the hell you doin' in my truck?"

A police car cruises slowly past behind him.

"Please," Connor says, his voice suddenly squeaky like it was before his voice changed. "Please, don't tell anyone. I've got to get out of this place." He reaches into his backpack, fumbling, and pulls out a wad of bills from his wallet. "You want money? I've got money. I'll give you all I've got."

"I don't want your money," the trucker says.

"All right, then, what?"

Even in the dim light the trucker must see the panic in Connor's eyes, but he doesn't say a thing.

"Please," says Connor again. "I'll do anything you want. . . ."

The trucker looks at him in silence for a moment more. "Is that so?" he finally says. Then he steps inside and closes the door behind him.

Connor shuts his eyes, not daring to consider what he's just gotten himself into.

The trucker sits beside him. "What's your name?"

"Connor." Then he realizes a moment too late he should have given a fake name.

The trucker scratches his beard stubble and thinks for a moment. "Let me show you something, Connor." He reaches over Connor and

grabs, of all things, a deck of cards from a little pouch hanging next to the bed. "Did ya ever see this?" The trucker takes the deck of cards in one hand and does a skillful one-handed shuffle. "Pretty good, huh?"

Connor, not knowing what to say, just nods.

"How about this?" Then the trucker takes a single card and with sleight of hand makes the card vanish into thin air. Then he reaches over and pulls the card right out of Connor's shirt pocket. "You like that?"

Connor lets out a nervous laugh.

"Well, those tricks you just saw?" The trucker says, "I didn't do 'em."

"I . . . don't know what you mean."

The trucker rolls up his sleeve to reveal that the arm, which had done the tricks, had been grafted on at the elbow.

"Ten years ago I fell asleep at the wheel," the trucker tells him. "Big accident. I lost an arm, a kidney, and a few other things. I got new ones, though, and I pulled through." He looks at his hands, and now Connor can see that the trick-card hand is a little different from the other one. The trucker's other hand has thicker fingers, and the skin is a bit more olive in tone.

"So," says Connor, "you got dealt a new hand."

The trucker laughs at that, then he becomes quiet for a moment, looking at his replacement hand. "These fingers here knew things the rest of me didn't. Muscle memory, they call it. And there's not a day that goes by that I don't wonder what other incredible things that kid who owned this arm knew, before he was unwound . . . whoever he was."

The trucker stands up. "You're lucky you came to me," he says. "There are truckers out there who'll take whatever you offer, then turn you in anyway."

"And you're not like that?"

"No, I'm not." He puts out his hand—his *other* hand—and Connor shakes it. "Josias Aldridge," he says. "I'm heading north from here. You can ride with me till morning."

Connor's relief is so great, it takes the wind right out of him. He can't even offer a thank-you.

"That bed there's not the most comfortable in the world," says Aldridge, "but it does the job. Get yourself some rest. I just gotta go take a dump, and then we'll be on our way." Then he closes the door, and Connor listens to his footsteps heading off toward the bathroom. Connor finally lets his guard down and begins to feel his own exhaustion. The trucker didn't give him a destination, just a direction, and that's fine. North, south, east, west—it doesn't matter as long as it's away from here. As for his next move, well, first he's got to get through this one before he can think about what comes next.

A minute later Connor's already beginning to doze when he hears the shout from outside.

"We know you're in there! Come out now and you won't get hurt!"

Connor's heart sinks. Josias Aldridge has apparently pulled another sleight of hand. He's made Connor appear for the police. Abracadabra. With his journey over before it even began, Connor swings the door open to see three Juvey-cops aiming weapons.

But they're not aiming at him.

In fact, their backs are to him.

Across the way, the cab door swings open of the truck he had hidden under just a few minutes before, and a kid comes out from behind the empty driver's seat, his hands in the air. Connor recognizes him right away. It's a kid he knows from school. Andy Jameson.

My God, is Andy being unwound too?

There's a look of fear on Andy's face, but beyond it is something worse. A look of utter defeat. That's when Connor realizes his own folly. He'd been so surprised by this turn of events that he's still just standing there, exposed for anyone to see. Well, the policemen don't see him. But Andy does. He catches sight of Connor, holds his gaze, only for a moment . . .

. . . and in that moment something remarkable happens.

The look of despair on Andy's face is suddenly replaced by a steely resolve bordering on triumph. He quickly looks away from Connor and

takes a few steps before the police grab him—steps *away* from Connor, so that the police still have their backs to him.

Andy had seen him and had not given him away! If Andy has nothing else after this day, at least he'll have this small victory.

Connor leans back into the shadows of the truck and slowly pulls the door closed. Outside, as the police take Andy away, Connor lies back down, and his tears come as sudden as a summer downpour. He's not sure who he's crying for—for Andy, for himself, for Ariana—and not knowing makes his tears flow all the more. Instead of wiping the tears away he lets them dry on his face like he used to when he was a little boy and the things he cried about were so insignificant that they'd be forgotten by morning.

The trucker never comes to check on him. Instead Connor hears the engine start and feels the truck pulling out. The gentle motion of the road rocks him to sleep.

* * *

The ring of Connor's cell phone wakes him out of a deep sleep. He fights consciousness. He wants to go back to the dream he was having. It was about a place he was sure he had been to, although he couldn't quite remember when. He was at a cabin on a beach with his parents, before his brother was born. Connor's leg had fallen through a rotted board on the porch into spiderwebs so thick, they felt like cotton. Connor had screamed and screamed from the pain, and the fear of the giant spiders that he was convinced would eat his leg off. And yet, this was a good dream—a good memory—because his father was there to pull him free, and carry him inside, where they bandaged his leg and sat him by the fire with some kind of cider so flavorful, he could still taste it when he thought about it. His father told him a story that he can no longer remember, but that's all right. It wasn't the story but the tone of his voice that mattered, a gentle baritone rumble as calming as waves breaking on a shore. Little-boy-Connor drank his cider and leaned back against his mother pretending to fall asleep, but what he was really doing was trying to dissolve into the moment and make it last forever. In the dream he did dissolve. His whole being flowed into

the cider cup, and his parents placed it gently on the table, close enough to the fire to keep it warm forever and always.

Stupid dreams. Even the good ones are bad, because they remind you how poorly reality measures up.

His cell phone rings again, chasing away the last of the dream. Connor almost answers it. The sleeper room of the truck is so dark, he doesn't realize at first that he's not in his own bed. The only thing that saves him is that he can't find his phone and he must turn on a light. When he finds a wall where his nightstand should be, he realizes that this isn't his room. The phone rings again. That's when it all comes back to him, and he remembers where he is. Connor finds his phone in his backpack. The phone ID says the call is from his father.

So now his parents know he's gone. Do they really think he'll answer his phone? He waits until voicemail takes the call, then he turns off the power. His watch says 7:30 a.m. He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, trying to calculate how far they've come. The truck isn't moving anymore, but they must have traveled at least two hundred miles while he slept. It's a good start.

There's a knock on the door. "Come on out, kid. Your ride's over."

Connor's not complaining—it was outrageously generous of this truck driver to do what he did. Connor won't ask any more of him. He swings open the door and steps out to thank the man, but it's not Josias Aldridge at the door. Aldridge is a few yards away being handcuffed, and in front of Connor is a policeman: a Juvey-cop wearing a smile as big as all outdoors. Standing ten yards away is Connor's father, still holding the cell phone he had just called from.

"It's over, son," his father says.

It makes Connor furious. *I'm not your son!* He wants to shout. *I stopped being your son when you signed the unwind order!* But the shock of the moment leaves him speechless.

It had been so stupid of Connor to leave his cell phone on—that's how they tracked him—and he wonders how many other kids are caught by their own blind trust of technology. Well, Connor's not going the way Andy Jameson did. He quickly assesses the situation. The truck has been pulled over to the side of the interstate by two

highway patrol cars and a Juveycop unit. Traffic barrels past at seventy miles per hour, oblivious to the little drama unfolding on the shoulder. Connor makes a split-second decision and bolts, pushing the officer against the truck and racing across the busy highway. Would they shoot an unarmed kid in the back, he wonders, or would they shoot him in the legs and spare his vital organs? As he races onto the interstate, cars swerve around him, but he keeps on going.

"Connor, stop!" he hears his father yell. Then he hears a gun fire.

He feels the impact, but not in his skin. The bullet embeds in his backpack. He doesn't look behind him. Then, as he reaches the highway median, he hears another gunshot, and a small blue splotch appears on the center divider. They're firing tranquilizer bullets. They're not taking him out, they're trying to take him down—and they're much more likely to fire tranq bullets at will, than regular bullets.

Connor climbs over the center divider, and finds himself in the path of a Cadillac that's not stopping for anything. The car swerves to avoid him, and by sheer luck Connor's momentum takes him just a few inches out of the Caddy's path. Its side mirror smacks him painfully in the ribs before the car screeches to a halt, sending the acrid stench of burned rubber up his nostrils. Holding his aching side, Connor sees someone looking at him from an open window of the backseat. It's another kid, dressed all in white. The kid is terrified.

With the police already reaching the center divider, Connor looks into the eyes of this frightened kid, and knows what he has to do. It's time for another split-second decision. He reaches through the window, pulls up the lock, and opens the door.

OceanofPDF.com

2 · Risa

Risa paces backstage, waiting for her turn at the piano.

She knows she could play the sonata in her sleep—in fact, she often does. So many nights she would wake up to feel her fingers playing on the bed sheets. She would hear the music in her head, and it would still play for a few moments after she awoke, but then it would dissolve into the night, leaving nothing but her fingers drumming against the covers.

She *has* to know the Sonata. It *has* to come to her as easily as breathing.

"It's not a competition," Mr. Durkin always tells her. "There are no winners or losers at a recital."

Well, Risa knows better.

"Risa Ward," the stage manager calls. "You're up."

She rolls her shoulders, adjusts the barrette in her long brown hair, then she takes the stage. The applause from the audience is polite, nothing more. Some of it is genuine, for she does have friends out there, and teachers who want her to succeed. But mostly it's the obligatory applause from an audience waiting to be impressed.

Mr. Durkin is out there. He has been her piano teacher for five years. He's the closest thing Risa has to a parent. She's lucky. Not every kid at Ohio State Home 23 has a teacher they can say that about. Most StaHo kids hate their teachers, because they see them as jailers.

Ignoring the stiff formality of her recital dress, she sits at the piano; it's a concert Steinway as ebony as the night, and just as long.

Focus.

She keeps her eyes on the piano, forcing the audience to recede into darkness. The audience doesn't matter. All that matters is the piano and the glorious sounds she's about to charm out of it.

She holds her fingers above the keys for a moment, then begins with perfect passion. Soon her fingers dance across the keys making the flawless seem facile. She makes the instrument sing . . . and then her left ring finger stumbles on a B-flat, slipping awkwardly onto B-natural.

A mistake.

It happens so quickly, it could go unnoticed—but not by Risa. She holds the wrong note in her mind, and even as she continues playing, that note reverberates within her, growing to a crescendo, stealing her focus until she slips again, into a second wrong note, and then, two minutes later, blows an entire chord. Tears begin to fill her eyes, and she can't see clearly.

You don't need to see, she tells herself. *You just need to feel the music.* She can still pull out of this nosedive, can't she? Her mistakes, which sound so awful to her, are barely noticeable.

"Relax," Mr. Durkin would tell her. "No one is judging you."

Perhaps he truly believes that—but then, he can afford to believe it. He's not fifteen, and he's never been a ward of the state.

* * *

Five mistakes.

Every one of them is small, subtle, but they are mistakes nonetheless. It would have been fine if any of the other kids' performances were less than stellar, but the others shined.

Still, Mr. Durkin is all smiles when he greets Risa at the reception. "You were marvelous!" he says. "I'm proud of you."

"I stunk up the stage."

"Nonsense. You chose one of Chopin's most difficult pieces. Professionals can't get through it without an error or two. You did it justice!"

"I need more than justice."

Mr. Durkin sighs, but he doesn't deny it. "You're coming along nicely. I look forward to the day I see those hands playing in Carnegie Hall." His smile is warm and genuine, as are the congratulations from the other girls in her dorm. It's enough warmth to ease her sleep that

night, and to give her hope that maybe, just maybe, she's making too much of it and being unnecessarily hard on herself. She falls asleep thinking of what she might choose to play next.

* * *

One week later she's called into the headmaster's office.

There are three people there. *A tribunal,* thinks Risa. Three adults sitting in judgment, like the three monkeys: hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil.

"Please sit down, Risa," says the headmaster.

She tries to sit gracefully but her knees, now unsteady, won't allow it. She slaps awkwardly down into a chair far too plush for an inquisition.

Risa doesn't know the other two people sitting beside the headmaster, but they both look very official. Their demeanor is relaxed, as if this is business as usual for them.

The woman to the headmaster's left identifies herself as the social worker assigned to Risa's "case." Until that moment, Risa didn't know she had a case. She says her name. Ms. Something-or-other. The name never even makes it into Risa's memory. She flips through the pages of Risa's fifteen years of life as casually as if she were reading a newspaper. "Let's see . . . you've been a ward of the state from birth. It looks like your behavior has been exemplary. Your grades have been respectable, but not excellent." Then the social worker looks up and smiles. "I saw your performance the other night. You were very good."

Good, thinks Risa, *but not excellent.*

Ms. Something-or-other leafs through the folder for a few seconds more, but Risa can tell she's not really looking. Whatever's going on here was decided long before Risa walked through the door.

"Why am I here?"

Ms. Something-or-other closes her folder and glances at the headmaster and the man beside him in an expensive suit. The suit nods, and the social worker turns back to Risa with a warm smile. "We feel you've reached your potential here," she says. "Headmaster Thomas and Mr. Paulson are in agreement with me."

Risa glances at the suit. "Who's Mr. Paulson?"

The suit clears his throat and says, almost as an apology, "I'm the school's legal counsel."

"A lawyer? Why is there a lawyer here?"

"Just procedure," Headmaster Thomas tells her. He puts a finger into his collar, stretching it, as if his tie has suddenly become a noose. "It's school policy to have a lawyer present at these kinds of proceedings."

"And what kind of proceeding is this?"

The three look at one another, none of them wanting to take the lead. Finally Ms. Something-or-other speaks up. "You must know that space in state homes are at a premium these days, and with budget cuts, every StaHo is impacted—ours included."

Risa holds cold eye contact with her. "Wards of the state are guaranteed a place in state homes."

"Very true—but the guarantee only holds until thirteen."

Then all of a sudden everyone has something to say.

"The money only stretches so far," says the headmaster.

"Educational standards could be compromised," says the lawyer.

"We only want what's best for you, and all the other children here," says the social worker.

And back and forth it goes like a three-way Ping-Pong match. Risa says nothing, only listens.

"You're a good musician, but . . ."

"As I said, you've reached your potential."

"As far as you can go."

"Perhaps if you had chosen a less competitive course of study."

"Well, that's all water under the bridge."

"Our hands are tied."

"There are unwanted babies born every day—and not all of them get storked."

"We're obliged to take the ones that don't."

"We have to make room for every new ward."

"Which means cutting 5 percent of our teenage population."

"You do understand, don't you?"

Risa can't listen anymore, so she shuts them up by saying what they don't have the courage to say themselves.

"I'm being unwound?"

Silence. It's more of an answer than if they had said "yes."

The social worker reaches over to take Risa's hand, but Risa pulls it back before she can. "It's all right to be frightened. Change is always scary."

"Change?" yells Risa, "What do you mean 'change'? Dying is a little bit more than a 'change.'"

The headmaster's tie turns into a noose again, preventing blood from getting to his face. The lawyer opens his briefcase. "Please, Miss Ward. It's not dying, and I'm sure everyone here would be more comfortable if you didn't suggest something so blatantly inflammatory. The fact is, 100 percent of you will still be alive, just in a divided state." Then he reaches into his briefcase and hands her a colorful pamphlet. "This is a brochure from Twin Lakes Harvest Camp."

"It's a fine place," the headmaster says. "It's our facility of choice for all our Unwinds. In fact, my own nephew was unwound there."

"Goody for him."

"Change," repeated the social worker, "that's all. The way ice becomes water, the way water becomes clouds. *You will live,* Risa. Only in a different form."

But Risa's not hearing anymore. Panic has already started to set in. "I don't have to be a musician. I can do something else."

Headmaster Thomas sadly shakes his head. "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

"No, it's not. I could work out. I could become a boeuf. The military always needs more boeufs!"

The lawyer sighs in exasperation and looks at his watch. The social worker leans forward. "Risa, please," she says. "It takes a certain body type for a girl to be an Army boeuf, and many years of physical training."

"Don't I have a choice in this?" But when she looks behind her, the answer is clear. There are two guards waiting to make sure that she has no choice at all. And as they lead her away, she thinks of Mr.

Durkin. With a bitter laugh, Risa realizes that he may get his wish after all. Someday he may see her hands playing in Carnegie Hall. Unfortunately, the rest of Risa won't be there.

* * *

She is not allowed to return to her dormitory. She will take nothing with her, because there's nothing she needs. That's the way it is with unwinds. Just a handful of her friends sneak down to the school's transportation center, stealing quick hugs and shedding quick tears, all the while looking over their shoulders, afraid of getting caught.

Mr. Durkin does not come. This hurts Risa most of all.

She sleeps in a guest room in the home's welcome center, then, at dawn, she's loaded onto a bus full of kids being transferred from the huge StaHo complex to other places. She recognizes some faces, but doesn't actually know any of her travel companions.

Across the aisle, a fairly nice-looking boy—a military boeuf by the look of him—gives her a smile. "Hey," he says, flirting in a way only boeufs can.

"Hey," Risa says back.

"I'm being transferred to the state naval academy," he says. "How about you?"

"Oh, me?" She quickly sifts through the air for something impressive. "Miss Marple's Academy for the Highly Gifted."

"She's lying," says a scrawny, pale boy sitting on Risa's other side. "She's an Unwind."

Suddenly the boeuf boy leans away, as if unwinding is contagious. "Oh," he says. "Well . . . uh . . . that's too bad. See ya!" And he leaves to sit with some other boeufs in the back.

"Thanks," snaps Risa at the scrawny kid.

The kid just shrugs. "It doesn't matter, anyway." Then he holds out his hand to shake. "I'm Samson," he says. "I'm an Unwind too."

Risa almost laughs. Samson. Such a strong name for such a mealy boy. She doesn't shake his hand, still annoyed at having been exposed to the handsome boeuf.

"So, what did you do to get yourself unwound?" Risa asks.

"It's not what I did, it's what I *didn't* do."

"What didn't you do?"

"Anything," Samson answers.

It makes sense to Risa. Not doing anything is an easy path to unwinding.

"I was never going to amount to much anyway," Samson says, "but now, statistically speaking, there's a better chance that some part of me will go on to greatness somewhere in the world. I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless."

The fact that his twisted logic almost makes sense just makes her angrier. "Hope you enjoy harvest camp, Samson." Then she leaves to find another seat.

"Please sit down!" calls the chaperone from the front, but no one's listening to her. The bus is full of kids moving from seat to seat, trying to find kindred spirits or trying to escape them. Risa finds herself a window seat, with no one beside her.

This bus trip will be only the first leg of her journey. They explained to her—to all the kids after they boarded the bus—that they would first be taken to a central transportation center, where kids from dozens of state homes would be sorted onto buses that would take them to wherever they were going. Risa's next bus would be a bus full of Samsons. Wonderful. She had already considered the possibility of sneaking onto another bus, but the bar codes on their waistbands make that an impossibility. It's all perfectly organized, and foolproof. Still, Risa occupies her mind with all the scenarios that could lead to escape.

That's when she sees the commotion out of her window. It's farther up the road. Squad cars are on the other side of the freeway, and as the bus changes lanes, she sees two figures in the road: two kids racing across traffic. One kid has the other in a chokehold and is practically dragging him. And both of them have run right in front of the bus.

Risa's head is slammed against the window as the bus suddenly pulls to the right to avoid the two kids. The bus fills with gasps and screams, and Risa is thrown forward, down the aisle, as the bus comes

to a sudden, jarring stop. Her hip is hurt, but not bad. It's just a bruise. She gets up, quickly taking stock of the situation. The bus leans sideways. It's off the road, in a ditch. The windshield is smashed, and it's covered with blood. Lots of it.

Kids around her all check themselves. Like her, no one is badly hurt, although some are making more of a fuss than others. The chaperone tries to calm down one girl who's hysterical.

And in this chaos, Risa has a sudden realization.

This is not part of the plan.

The system might have a million contingencies for state wards trying to screw with things, but they don't have a plan of action for dealing with an accident. For the next few seconds, all bets are off.

Risa fixes her eyes on the front door of the bus, holds her breath, and races toward that door.

OceanofPDF.com

3 · Lev

The party is big, the party is expensive, the party has been planned for years.

There are at least two hundred people in the country club's grand ballroom. Lev got to pick the band, he got to choose the food—he even got to select the color of the linens: red and white—for the Cincinnati Reds—and his name, Levi Jedediah Calder, is stamped in gold on the silk napkins for people to take home as a remembrance.

This party is all for him. It's all *about* him. And he's determined to have the best time of his life.

The adults at the party are relatives, friends of the family, his parents' business associates—but at least eighty of the guests are Lev's friends. There are kids from school, from church, and from the various sports teams he's been on. Some of his friends had felt funny about coming of course.

"I don't know, Lev," they had said, "it's kind of weird. I mean, what kind of present am I supposed to bring?"

"You don't have to bring anything," Lev had told them. "There *are* no presents at a tithing party. Just come and have a good time. I know *I* will."

And he does.

He asks every girl he invited to dance, and not a single one turns him down. He even has people lift him up in a chair and dance with him around the room, because he had seen them do that at a Jewish friend's bar mitzvah. True, this is a very different kind of party, but it's also a celebration of him turning thirteen, so he deserves to get lifted up in a chair too, doesn't he?

Lev finds that the dinner is served far too soon. He looks at his watch to see that two hours have already gone by. How could it have gone so quickly?

Soon people grab the microphone and, holding up glasses of champagne, they start making toasts to Lev. His parents give a toast. His grandmother gives a toast. An uncle he doesn't even know gives a toast.

"To Lev: It's been a joy to watch you grow into the fine young man you are, and I know in my heart that you'll do great things for everyone you touch in this world."

It feels wonderful and weird for so many people to say so many kind things about him. It's all too much, but in some strange way it's not enough. There's got to be more. More food. More dancing. More time. They're already bringing out the birthday cake. Everyone knows the party ends once the cake is served. Why are they bringing out the cake? Can it really be three hours into the party?

Then comes one more toast. It's the toast that almost ruins the evening.

Of Lev's many brothers and sisters, Marcus has been the quietest all evening. It's unlike him. Lev should have known something was going to happen. Lev, at thirteen, is the youngest of ten. Marcus, at twenty-eight, is the oldest. He flew halfway across the country to be here at Lev's tithing party, and yet he's barely danced, or spoken, or been a part of any of the festivities. He's also drunk. Lev has never seen Marcus drunk.

It happens after the formal toasts are given, when Lev's cake is being cut and distributed. It doesn't start as a toast; it starts as just a moment between brothers.

"Congrats, little bro," Marcus says, giving him a powerful hug. Lev can smell the alcohol on Marcus's breath. "Today you're a man. Sort of."

Their father, sitting at the head table just a few feet away, lets out a nervous chuckle.

"Thanks . . . sort of," Lev responds. He glances at his parents. His father waits to see what's coming next. His mother's pinched expression makes Lev feel tense.

Marcus stares at Lev with a smile that doesn't hold any of the emotion a smile usually comes with. "What do you think of all this?"

he asks Lev.

"It's great."

"Of course it is! All these people here for you? It's an amazing night. Amazing!"

"Yeah," says Lev. He's not sure where this is going, but he knows it's going somewhere. "I'm having the time of my life."

"Damn right! The time of your life! Gotta wrap up all those life events, all those parties, into one—birthdays, wedding, funeral." Then he turns to their father. "Very efficient, right, Dad?"

"That's enough," their father says quietly, but it only makes Marcus get louder.

"What? I'm not allowed to talk about it? Oh, that's right—this is a celebration. I almost forgot."

Lev wants Marcus to stop, but at the same time he doesn't.

Mom stands up and says in a voice more forceful than Dad's, "Marcus, sit down. You're embarrassing yourself."

By now everyone in the banquet hall has stopped whatever they were doing and are tuned in to the unfolding family drama. Marcus, seeing he has the room's attention, picks up someone's half-empty glass of champagne, and holds it high. "Here's to my brother, Lev," Marcus says. "And to our parents! Who have always done the right thing. The *appropriate* thing. Who have always given generously to charity. Who have always given 10 percent of everything to our church. Hey, Mom—we're lucky you had ten kids instead of five, otherwise we'd end up having to cut Lev off at the waist!"

Gasps from all those assembled. People shaking their heads. Such disappointing behavior from an eldest son.

Now Dad comes up and grabs Marcus's arm tightly. "You're done!" Dad says. "Sit down."

Marcus shakes Dad's arm off. "Oh, I'll do better than sit down." Now there are tears in Marcus's eyes as he turns to Lev. "I love you, bro . . . and I know this is your special day. But I can't be a part of this." He hurls the champagne glass against the wall, where it shatters, spraying fragments of crystal all over the buffet table. Then he turns

and storms out with such steady confidence in his stride that Lev realizes he's not drunk at all.

Lev's father signals the band and they kick into a dance number even before Marcus is gone from the huge room. People begin to fill the void of the dance floor, doing their best to make the awkward moment go away.

"I'm sorry about that, Lev," his father tells him. "Why don't you . . . why don't you go dance?"

But Lev finds he doesn't want to dance anymore. The desire he had to be the center of attention left along with his brother. "I'd like to talk to Pastor Dan, if that's all right."

"Of course it is."

Pastor Dan has been a family friend since before Lev was born, and he has always been much easier to talk to than his parents about any subject that required patience and wisdom.

The banquet hall is too loud, too crowded, so they go outside to the patio overlooking the country club's golf course.

"Are you getting scared?" Pastor Dan asks. He's always able to figure out what's on Lev's mind.

Lev nods. "I thought I was ready. I thought I was prepared."

"It's natural. Don't worry about it,"

But it doesn't ease the disappointment Lev feels in himself. He's had his entire life to prepare for this—it should have been enough. He knew he was a tithe from the time he was little. "You're special," his parents had always told him. "Your life will be to serve God, and mankind." He doesn't remember how old he was when he found out exactly what that meant for him.

"Have kids in school been giving you a hard time?"

"No more than usual," Lev tells him. It's true. All his life he's had to deal with kids who resented him, because grownups treated him as if he was special. There were kids who were kind, and kids who were cruel. That was life. It did bother him, though, when kids called him things like "dirty Unwind." As if he was like those *other* kids, whose parents signed the unwind order to get rid of them. That couldn't be further from the truth for Lev. He is his family's pride and joy. Straight

As in school, MVP in little league. Just because he's to be unwound does NOT means he's an Unwind.

There are, of course, a few other tithes at his school, but they're all from other religions, so Lev has never felt a real sense of camaraderie with them. The huge turnout at tonight's party testifies to how many friends Lev has—but they're not *like* him: Their lives will be lived in an undivided state. Their bodies and their futures are their own. Lev has always felt closer to God than to his friends, or even his family. He often wonders if being chosen always leaves a person so isolated. Or is there something wrong with him?

"I've been having lots of wrong thoughts," Lev tells Pastor Dan.

"There are no wrong thoughts, only thoughts that need to be worked through and overcome."

"Well . . . I've just been feeling jealous of my brothers and sisters. I keep thinking of how the baseball team is going to miss me. I know it's an honor and a blessing to be a tithe, but I can't stop wondering why it has to be me."

Pastor Dan, who was always so good at looking people in the eye, now looks away. "It was decided before you were born. It's not anything you did, or didn't do."

"The thing is, I know tons of people with big families . . ."

Pastor Dan nodded. "Yes, it's very common these days."

"But lots of those people don't tithe at all—even families in our church—and nobody blames them."

"There are also people who tithe their first, second, or third child. Every family must make the decision for itself. Your parents waited a long time before making the decision to have you."

Lev reluctantly nods, knowing it's true. He was a "true tithe." With five natural siblings, plus one adopted, and three that arrived "by stork," Lev was exactly one-tenth. His parents had always told him that made him all the more special.

"I'll tell you something, Lev," Pastor Dan says, finally meeting his eye. Like Marcus, his eyes are moist, just one step short of tears. "I've watched all your brothers and sisters grow and, although I don't like playing favorites, I think you are the finest of all of them in so many

ways, I wouldn't even know where to start. That's what God asks for, you know. Not first fruits but best fruits."

"Thank you, sir." Pastor Dan always knows what to say to make Lev feel better. "I'm ready for this," and saying it makes him realize that, in spite of his fears and misgivings, he truly is ready. This is everything he has lived for. Even so, his tithing party ends much too soon.

* * *

In the morning the Calders have to eat breakfast in the dining room, with all the leaves in the table. All of Lev's brothers and sisters are there. Only a few of them still live at home, but today they've all come over for breakfast. All of them, that is, except Marcus.

Yet, for such a large family it's unusually quiet, and the clatter of silverware on china makes the lack of conversation even more conspicuous.

Lev, dressed in his silk tithing whites, eats carefully, so as not to leave any stains on his clothes. After breakfast, the good-byes are long, full of hugs and kisses. It's the worst part. Lev wishes they would all just let him go and get the good-byes over with.

Pastor Dan arrives—he's come at Lev's request—and once he's there, the good-byes move more quickly. Nobody wants to waste the pastor's valuable time. Lev is the first one out in his Dad's Cadillac, and although he tries not to look back as his father starts the car and drives away, he can't help it. He watches as his home disappears behind them.

I will never see that home again, he thinks, but he pushes the thought out of his mind. It's unproductive, unhelpful, selfish. He looks at Pastor Dan, who sits beside him in the backseat watching him, and the pastor smiles.

"It's all right, Lev," he says. Just hearing him say it makes it so.

"How far is the harvest camp?" Lev asks to whoever cares to answer.

"It's about an hour from here," his Mom says.

"And . . . will they do it right away?"

His parents look to each other. "I'm sure there'll be an orientation," says his father.

That short answer makes it clear to Lev that they don't know any more than he does.

As they pull onto the interstate, Lev rolls down the window to feel the wind on his face, and closes his eyes to prepare himself.

This is what I was born for. It's what I've lived my life for. I am chosen. I am blessed. And I am happy.

Suddenly his father slams on the brakes.

With his eyes closed, Lev doesn't see the reason for their unexpected stop. He just feels the sharp deceleration of the Cadillac and the pull of the seat belt on his shoulder. He opens his eyes to see they have stopped on the interstate. Police lights flash. And—was that a gunshot he just heard?

"What's going on?"

Then, just outside his window is another kid, a few years older than him. He looks scared. He looks dangerous. Lev reaches over to quickly put up his window, but before he can this kid reaches in, pulls up the lock on the door, and tugs the door open. Lev is frozen. He doesn't know what to do.

"Mom? Dad?" he calls.

The boy with murder in his eyes tugs on Lev's white silk shirt, trying to pull him out of the car, but the seat belt holds him tight.

"What are you doing? Leave me alone!"

Lev's mom screams for his father to do something, but he's fumbling with his own seat belt.

The maniac reaches over and in one swift motion unclips Lev's seat belt. Pastor Dan grabs at the intruder, who responds with a quick powerful punch—a jab right at Pastor Dan's jaw. The shock of seeing such violence distracts Lev at a crucial moment. The maniac tugs on him again, and this time Lev falls out of the car, hitting his head on the pavement. When he looks up he sees his father finally getting out of the car, but the crazy kid swings the car door hard against him, sending him flying.

"Dad!" His father lands in the path of an oncoming car. The car swerves and, thank God, it misses him—but it cuts off another car, hitting it, that car spins out of control, and the sound of crashes fills

the air. Lev is pulled to his feet again by the kid, who grabs Lev's arm and drags him off. Lev is small for his age. This kid is a couple of years older, and much bigger. Lev can't break free.

"Stop!" yells Lev. "You can have whatever you want. Take my wallet," he says, even though he has no wallet. "Take the car. Just don't hurt anyone."

The kid considers the car, but only for an instant. Bullets now fly past them. On the southbound roadway are policemen who have finally stopped traffic on their side of the interstate, and have made it to the median dividing the north and southbound lanes. The closest officer fires again. A tranq bullet hits the Cadillac and splatters.

The crazy kid now puts Lev into a choke hold, holding Lev between himself and the officers. Lev realizes that he doesn't want a car, or money: He wants a hostage.

"Stop struggling—I've got a gun!" And Lev feels the kid poke him in the side. Lev knows it's not a gun—he knows it's just the kid's finger, but this is clearly an unstable individual, and he doesn't want to set him off.

"I'm worthless as a human shield," Lev says, trying to reason with him. "Those are tranq bullets they're shooting, which means the cops don't care if they hit me—they'll just knock me out."

"Better you than me."

Bullets fly past them as they wind around swerving traffic. "Please—you don't understand—you can't take me now, I'm being tithed. I'll miss my harvest! You'll ruin everything!"

And finally, a hint of humanity comes to the maniac's eyes. *"You're an Unwind?"*

There are a million more things to be furious about, but Lev finds himself incensed by what he's just been called. "I'm a *tithe*!"

A blaring horn, and Lev turns to see a bus bearing down on them. Before either of them has a chance to scream, the bus careens off the road to avoid them and smashes head-on against the fat trunk of a huge oak, stopping the bus cold.

There's blood all over the smashed windshield. It's the bus driver's blood. He hangs halfway through, and he's not moving.

“Oh, crap!” says the maniac, a creepy whine in his voice.

A girl has just stepped out of the bus. The crazy kid looks at her, and Lev realizes that now, while he’s distracted, is the last chance he’s going to have to get away. This kid is an animal. The only way to deal with him is for Lev to become an animal himself. So Lev grabs the arm that’s locked around his neck and sinks his teeth in with the full force of his jaws until he tastes blood. The kid screams, letting go, and Lev bolts away, racing toward his father’s car.

As he nears it, a back door opens. It’s Pastor Dan opening the door to receive him, yet the expression on the man’s face is anything but happy.

With his face already swelling from the crazy kid’s brutal punch, Pastor Dan says with a hiss and strange warble to his voice, “Run, Lev!”

Lev wasn’t expecting this. “What?”

“Run! Run as fast and as far as you can. RUN!”

Lev stands there, impotent, unable to move, unable to process this. Why is Pastor Dan telling him to run? Then comes a sudden pain in his shoulder, and everything starts spinning round and round and down a drain into darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

4 · Connor

The pain in Connor's arm is unbearable. That little monster actually bit him—practically took a chunk out of his forearm. Another car slams the brakes to avoid hitting him, and gets rear-ended. The tranq bullets have stopped flying, but he knows that's temporary. The accidents have gotten the Juvey-cops momentarily distracted, but they won't stay that way for long.

Just then, he makes eye contact with the girl who got off the bus. He thinks she's going to go stumbling toward all the people who are running from their cars to help, but instead she turns and runs into the woods. Has the whole world gone insane?

Still holding his stinging, bleeding arm, he turns to run into the woods as well, but stops. He turns back to see the kid in white just reaching his car. Connor doesn't know where the Juvey-cops are. They're lurking, no doubt, somewhere in the tangle of vehicles. That's when Connor makes a split-second decision. He knows it's a stupid decision, but he can't help himself. All he knows is that he's caused death today. The bus driver's, maybe more. Even if it risks everything, he's got to balance it somehow. He's got to do something decent, something good to make up for the awful consequence of his kicking-AWOL. And so, battling his own instinct for self-preservation, he races toward the kid in white who was so happily going to his own unwinding.

It's as Connor gets close that he sees the cop twenty yards away, raising his weapon, and firing. He shouldn't have risked this! He should have gotten away when he could. Connor waits for the telltale sting of the tranq bullet but it never comes, because the moment the bullet is fired, the boy in white takes a step back, and he's hit in the shoulder. Two seconds, and his knees buckle. The kid hits the ground, out cold, unwittingly taking the bullet meant for Connor.

Connor wastes no time. He picks the kid up off the ground and flips him over his shoulder. Tranq bullets fly, but no others connect. In

a few seconds Connor's past the bus, where a gaggle of shell-shocked teens are getting off. He pushes past them and into the woods.

The woods are dense, not just with trees but with tall shrubs and vines, yet there's already a path of broken branches and parted shrubs made by the girl who ran from the bus. They might as well have arrows pointing the police in their direction. He sees the girl up ahead and calls out to her. "Stop!" She turns, but only for an instant, then renews her battle with the dense growth all around her.

Connor gently puts down the boy in white and hurries forward, catching up with her. He grabs her arm gently, yet firmly enough so that she can't pull away. "Whatever you're running from, you won't get away unless we work together," he tells her. He glances behind him to make sure that no Juvey-cops are in sight yet. There aren't. "Please—we don't have much time."

The girl stops fighting the bushes and looks at him.

"What do you have in mind?"

OceanofPDF.com

5 · Cop

Officer J. T. Nelson has spent twelve years working Juvenile. He knows AWOL Unwinds will not give up as long as there's an ounce of consciousness left in them. They are high on adrenaline, and often high on illegal substances as well. Nicotine, caffeine, or worse. He wishes his bullets were the real thing. He wishes he could truly take these wastes-of-life out rather than just taking them down. Maybe then they wouldn't be so quick to run—and if they did, well, no great loss.

The officer follows the path made through the woods by the AWOL Unwind, until he comes to a lump on the ground. It's the hostage, just dumped in the path, his white clothes smudged green from the foliage, and brown from the muddy earth. *Good,* thinks the officer. It was a good thing this boy took that bullet after all. Being unconscious probably saved this kid's life. No telling where the Unwind would have taken him, or what he'd have done to him.

"Help me!" says a voice just ahead of him. It's the voice of a girl. The officer isn't expecting this.

"Help me, please, I'm hurt!"

Deeper in the woods a girl sits up against a tree, holding her arm, grimacing in pain. He doesn't have time for this, but "Protect and Serve" is more than just a motto to him. He sometimes wishes he didn't have such moral integrity.

He goes over to the girl. "What are you doing here?"

"I was on the bus. I got off and ran away because I was scared it would explode. I think my arm's broken."

He looks at the girl's arm. It's not even bruised. This should be his first clue, but his mind is already too far ahead of him to catch it. "Stay here, I'll be right back." He turns, ready to pick up his pursuit, when something drops on him from above. Not some*thing,* some*one*. The AWOL Unwind! The officer is knocked to the ground, and

suddenly there are two figures attacking him—the Unwind and the girl. They're in this together. How could he have been so stupid? He reaches for his tranq pistol, but it's not there. Instead he feels its muzzle against his left thigh, and he sees triumph in the Unwind's dark, vicious eyes.

"Nighty-night," the Unwind says.

A sharp pain in the officer's leg, and the world goes away.

OceanofPDF.com

6 · Lev

Lev wakes up to a dull ache in his shoulder. He thinks maybe he slept funny, but he quickly realizes the ache is from an injury. His left shoulder was the entry point of a tranq bullet, though he doesn't realize that just yet. All the things that had happened to him twelve hours before are like faint clouds in his mind that have lost their shape. All he knows for sure is that he was on his way to his tithing, he was kidnapped by a murderous teenager, and for some strange reason the image of Pastor Dan keeps coming back to him.

Pastor Dan was telling him to run.

He's sure that it must be a false memory, because he can't believe Pastor Dan would do such a thing.

Everything's blurry as Lev opens his eyes. He doesn't know where he is, only that it's night and he's not where he should be. The insane teen who took him sits across a small fire. There's a girl there, too.

That's when he realizes he'd been hit by a tranq bullet. His head hurts, he feels like he might puke, and his brain is still only at half power. He tries to get up, but can't. At first he thinks that's also because of the tranquilizers, but then he realizes he's tied to a tree by thick vines.

He tries to speak, but his voice comes out as a little groan and a lot of drool. The boy and girl look at him, and he's sure they're going to kill him now. They kept him alive just so he'd be awake when they killed him. Maniacs are like that.

"Look who's back from Tranqville," says the boy with wild eyes. Only his eyes aren't wild now, just his hair—it's all sticking up like he slept on it.

Although Lev's tongue feels like rubber, he manages to get out a single word. "Where . . ."

"Not sure," says the boy.

Then the girl adds, "But at least you're safe."

Safe? thinks Lev. *What could possibly be safe about this?*

"H. . . h. . . hostage?" Lev gets out.

The boy looks to the girl, then back to Lev. "Kind of. I guess." These two talk in an easy tone of voice, like they're all friends. *They're trying to lull me into a false sense of security,* thinks Lev. *They're trying to get me on their side, so I'll take part in whatever criminal activities they have planned.* There's an expression for that, isn't there? When a hostage joins the kidnappers' cause? The *Something* syndrome.

The crazy kid looks to a pile of berries and nuts obviously foraged from the woods. "You hungry?"

Lev nods, but the act of nodding makes his head spin so much, he realizes that no matter how hungry he is, he'd better not eat, because it'll come right back up. "No," he says.

"You sound confused," says the girl. "Don't worry, it's just the tranqs. They should wear off pretty soon."

Stockholm syndrome! That's it! Well, Lev won't be won over by this pair of kidnappers. He'll never be on their side.

Pastor Dan told me to run.

What had he meant? Did he mean run from the kidnappers? Maybe, but he seemed to be saying something else entirely. Lev closes his eyes and chases the thought away.

"My parents will look for me," Lev says, his mouth finally able to put together whole sentences.

The kids don't answer because they probably know it's true.

"How much is the ransom?" Lev asks.

"Ransom? There's no ransom," says the crazy kid. "I took you to save you, idiot!"

To save him? Lev just stares at him in disbelief. "But . . . but my tithing . . ."

The crazy kid looks at him and shakes his head. "I've never seen a kid in such a hurry to be unwound."

It's no use trying to explain to this godless pair what tithing is all about. How giving of one's self is the ultimate blessing. They'd never understand or care. Save him? They haven't saved him, they've damned him.

Then Lev realizes something. He realizes that he can use this entire situation to his advantage. “My name’s Lev,” he says, trying to play it as cool as he can.

“Pleased to meet you, Lev,” says the girl. “I’m Risa, and this is Connor.”

Connor throws her a dirty look, making it clear that she gave him their real names. Not a good idea for hostage-takers, but then most criminals are stupid like that.

“Didn’t mean for you to take the tranq bullet,” Connor tells him. “But the cop was a bad shot.”

“Not your fault,” says Lev, even though every bit of it is Connor’s fault. Lev thinks about what happened, and says,”I would never have run from my own tithing.” That much, Lev knows, is true.

“Good thing I was around, then,” says Connor.

“Yeah,” says Risa. “If it wasn’t for Connor running across that highway, I’d probably be unwound by now too.”

There’s a moment of silence, then Lev, biting back his anger and revulsion, says, “Thank you. Thank you for saving me.”

“Don’t mention it,” says Connor.

Good. Let them think he’s grateful. Let them think they’re earning his trust. And once they’re lulled into their own false sense of security, he’ll make sure they both get exactly what they deserve.

OceanofPDF.com

7 · Connor

Connor should have kept the Juvey-cop's gun, but he wasn't thinking. He was so freaked out at having tranq'd a cop with his own weapon, he just dropped it and ran—just as he dropped his backpack on the interstate so he could carry Lev. His wallet with all his money was in that pack. Now he has nothing but pocket lint.

It's late now—or, more accurately, early—almost dawn. He and Risa had kept moving through the woods all day, as best they could with Connor having to carry an unconscious tithe. Once night fell, he and Risa had taken turns keeping watch while the other slept.

Connor knows that Lev can't be trusted, that's why Connor tied him to the tree—but there's no reason to trust this girl who had come running out of a bus either. It's only their common goal of staying alive that binds them.

The moon has left the sky now, but there's a faint glow promising a quick arrival of dawn. By now their faces would be everywhere. *Have you seen these teens? Do not approach. Considered extremely dangerous. Call the police immediately.* Funny how Connor had wasted so much time in school trying to convince people he was dangerous, but when it came down to it, he was never sure if he was all that dangerous at all. A danger to himself, maybe.

All the while, Lev watches him. At first the boy's eyes had been lazy and his head lolling to one side, but now those eyes are sharp. Even in the dimness of the dying fire Connor can see them. Chilly blue. Calculating. This kid is an odd bird. Connor's not quite sure what's going on on Planet Lev, and not quite sure he wants to know.

"That bite's gonna get infected if you don't take care of it," Lev says.

Connor looks to the spot on his arm where Lev bit him, still puffy and red. He had tuned the pain out until Lev reminded him. "I'll deal with it."

Lev continues to study him. "Why are you being unwound?"

Connor doesn't like the question for a whole lot of reasons. "You mean why WAS I being unwound—because, as you can see, I'm not being unwound anymore."

"They will if they catch you."

Connor feels like punching that smug look off the kid's face, but he restrains himself. He didn't rescue the kid just to beat him up.

"So, what's it like," Connor asks, "knowing all your life you're going to be sacrificed?" He meant it as a jab, but Lev takes the question seriously.

"It's better than going through life without knowing your purpose."

Connor's not sure if that was intentionally meant to make him squirm—as if his life has no purpose. It makes him feel like *he's* the one tied to a tree, not Lev. "I guess it could be worse," says Connor. "We could have all ended up like Humphrey Dunfee."

Lev seems surprised by the mention of the name. "You know that story? I thought they only told it in my neighborhood."

"Nah," says Connor. "Kids tell it everywhere."

"It's made up," says Risa, having just woken up.

"Maybe," says Connor. "But there was this one time a friend and I tried to find out about it while surfing one of the school's computers. We hit this one website that talked about it, and how his parents went all psycho. Then the computer crashed. It turns out we were hit by a virus that wiped out the entire district server. Coincidence? I don't think so."

Lev's taken in, but Risa, fairly disgusted, says, "Well, *I'll* never end up like Humphrey Dunfee, because you have to have parents for them to go psycho—and I don't." She stands up. Connor looks away from the dying fire to see that dawn has arrived.

"If we're going to keep from being caught, then we should change direction again," Risa says. "We should also think about disguising ourselves."

"Like how?" asks Connor.

"I don't know. Change our clothes first. Haircuts maybe. They'll be looking for two boys and a girl. Maybe I can disguise myself as a boy."

Connor takes a good look at her and smiles. Risa's pretty. Not in the way Ariana was pretty—in a better way. Ariana's prettiness was all about makeup and pigment injections and stuff. Risa has a natural kind of beauty. Without thinking, Connor reaches out to touch her hair, and gently says, "I don't think you could ever pass for a guy—"

Then suddenly, he finds his hand tugged behind him, his whole body spins around, and she painfully wrenches his arm up the small of his back. It hurts so much, he can't even say "Ouch." All he can say is, "Eh-eh-eh!"

"Touch me again and your arm gets ripped off," Risa tells him. "Got that?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Fine. Hands off. Got it."

Over at the oak tree, Lev laughs, apparently pleased to see Connor in pain.

She lets him go, but his shoulder still throbs. "You didn't have to do that," Connor says, trying not to show how much it still hurts. "It's not like I was going to hurt you or anything."

"Yeah, well, now you won't for sure," says Risa, maybe sounding a bit guilty for being so harsh. "Don't forget I lived in a state home."

Connor nods. He knows about StaHo kids. They have to learn to take care of themselves real young, or their lives are not very pleasant. He should have realized she was a touch-me-not.

"Excuse me," says Lev, "but we can't go anywhere if I'm tied to a tree."

Still, Connor doesn't like that judgmental look in Lev's eyes. "How do we know you won't run?"

"You don't, but until you untie me, I'm a hostage," Lev says. "Once I'm free, I'm a fugitive, like you. Tied up, I'm the enemy. Cut loose, I'm a friend."

"If you don't run," says Connor.

Risa impatiently begins untying the vines. "Unless we want to leave him here, we'll have to take that chance." Connor kneels to help, and in a few moments, Lev is free. He stands and stretches, rubbing his shoulder where the tranq bullet had hit him. Lev's eyes are still blue ice and hard for Connor to read, but he's not running. *Maybe,* thinks

Connor, *he's over the "duty" of being tithed. Maybe he's finally starting to see the sense of staying alive.*

OceanofPDF.com

8 · Risa

Risa finds herself unsettled by the food wrappers and broken bits of plastic they start coming across in the woods, because the first sign of civilization is always trash. Civilization means people who could recognize them if their faces have been smeared on the newsnet.

Risa knows that staying completely clear of human contact is an impossibility. She has no illusion about their chances, or their ability to remain unseen. As much as they need to remain anonymous, they cannot get by entirely alone. They need the help of others.

"No, we don't," Connor is quick to argue as the signs of civilization grow around them. It's not just trash now, but the mossy remnants of a knee-high stone wall, and the rusty remains of an old electrical tower from the days when electricity was transmitted by wires. "We don't need anyone. We'll take what we need."

Risa sighs, trying to hold together a patience that has already worn through. "I'm sure you're very good at stealing, but I don't think it's a good idea."

Connor appears insulted by the insinuation. "What do you think—people are just going to give us food and whatever else we need out of the goodness of their hearts?"

"No," says Risa, "but if we're clever about it instead of rushing into this blind, we'll have a better chance."

Her words or maybe just her intentionally condescending tone makes Connor storm off.

Risa notices Lev watching the argument from a distance. *If he's going to run, thinks Risa, now's the time for him to do it, while Connor and I are busy fighting.* And then it occurs to her that this is an excellent opportunity to test Lev, and see if he really is standing by them now, or biding his time until he can escape.

"Don't you walk away from me!" she growls at Connor, doing her best to keep the argument alive, all the while keeping an eye on Lev to

see if he bolts. "I'm still talking to you!"

Connor turns toward her. "Who says I have to listen?"

"You would if you had half a brain, but obviously you don't!"

Connor moves closer until he's deeper into her airspace than she likes anyone to get. "If it wasn't for me you'd be on your way to harvest camp!" he says. Risa raises a hand to push him back, but his hand shoots up faster, and he grabs her wrist before she can shove him. This is the moment Risa realizes she's gone too far. What does she really know about this boy? He was going to be unwound. Maybe there's a reason for it. Maybe a good reason.

Risa is careful not to struggle because struggling gives him the advantage. She lets her tone of voice convey all the weight. "Let go of me."

"Why? Exactly what do you think I'll do to you?"

"This is the second time you've touched me without permission," Risa says. Still, he does not let go—yet she does notice his grip isn't all that threatening. It isn't tight, it's loose. It isn't rough, it's gentle. She could easily pull out of it with a simple flick of her wrist. So why doesn't she?

Risa knows he's doing this to make a point, but what the point is, Risa isn't sure. Is he warning her that he can hurt her if he wants to? Or maybe his message is in the gentle nature of his grip—a way of saying he's not the hurting type.

Well, it doesn't matter, thinks Risa. Even a gentle violation is a violation.

She looks at his knee. A well-placed kick could break his kneecap.

"I could take you out in a second," she threatens.

If he's concerned, he doesn't show it. "I know."

Somehow he also knows that she won't do it—that the first time was just a reflex. If she were to hurt him a second time, though, it would be a conscious act. It would be by choice.

"Step off," she says. Her voice now lacks the force it had only moments before.

This time he listens and lets go, moving back to a respectable distance. They both could have hurt one another, but neither of them

did. Risa isn't quite sure what that means, all she knows is that she feels angry at him for such a mixture of reasons, she can't sort them out.

Then suddenly a voice calls to them from the right. "This is very entertaining and all, but I don't think fighting is going to help much."

It's Lev—and Risa realizes that her little ruse has backfired. She had set out to test him with a fake argument but the argument turned real, and in the process she completely forgot about Lev. He could have taken off, and they would not have known until he was long gone.

Risa throws Connor an evil look for good measure and the three of them continue on. It isn't until ten minutes later, when Lev goes off to relieve himself in private, that Connor talks to Risa again.

"Good one," Connor says. "It worked."

"What?"

Connor leans closer and whispers, "The argument. You put it on to see if Lev would run when we weren't paying attention, right?"

Risa is bowled over. "You knew that?"

Connor looks at her, a bit amused. "Well . . . yeah."

If Risa felt uncertain about him before, it's even worse now. She has no idea what to think. "So . . . everything that happened back there was all a show?"

Now it's Connor's turn to be unsure. "I guess. Sort of. Wasn't it?"

Risa has to hold back a smile. Suddenly she's feeling strangely at ease with Connor. She marvels at how that could be. If their argument had been entirely real, she'd be on her guard against him. If it had been entirely a show she'd be on guard too, because if he could lie so convincingly, she'd never be able to trust him. But this was a mixture of both. It was real, it was pretend, and that combination made it all right—it made it safe, like performing death-defying acrobatic tricks above a safety net.

She holds on to that unexpected feeling as the two of them catch up with Lev, and move toward the frightening prospect of civilization.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Two

Storked

"You can't change laws without first changing human nature."

—*Nurse Greta*

"You can't change human nature without first changing the law."

—*Nurse Yvonne*

OceanofPDF.com

9 · Mother

The mother is nineteen, but she doesn't feel that old. She feels no wiser, no more capable of dealing with this situation, than a little girl. When, she wonders, did she stop being a child? The law says it was when she turned eighteen, but the law doesn't know her.

Still aching from the trauma of delivery, she holds her newborn close. It's just after dawn on a chilly morning. She moves now through back alleys. Not a soul around. Dumpsters cast angular black shadows. Broken bottles everywhere. This she knows is the perfect time of day to do this. There's less of a chance that coyotes and other scavengers would be out. She couldn't bear the thought of the baby suffering needlessly.

A large green Dumpster looms before her, listing crookedly on the uneven pavement of the alley. She holds the baby tight, as if the Dumpster might grow hands and pull the baby into its filthy depths. Maneuvering around it, she continues down the alley.

There was a time, shortly after the Bill of Life was passed, that Dumpsters such as that would be tempting to girls like her. Desperate girls who would leave unwanted newborns in the trash. It had become so common that it wasn't even deemed newsworthy anymore—it had become just a part of life.

Funny, but the Bill of Life was supposed to protect the sanctity of life. Instead it just made life cheap. Thank goodness for the Storking Initiative, that wonderful law that allows girls like her a far better alternative.

As dawn becomes early morning, she leaves the alleys and enters a neighborhood that gets better with each street she crosses. The homes are large and inviting. This is the right neighborhood for storking.

She chooses the home shrewdly. The house she decides on isn't the largest, but it's not the smallest, either. It has a very short walkway to the street, so she can get away quickly, and it's overgrown with trees,

so no one either inside or out will be able to see her as she storks the newborn.

She carefully approaches the front door. No lights are on in the home yet, that's good. There's a car in the driveway—hopefully that means they're home. She gingerly climbs the porch steps, careful not to make a sound, then kneels down, placing the sleeping baby on the welcome mat. There are two blankets wrapped around the baby, and a wool cap covers its head. She makes the blankets nice and tight. It's the only thing she's learned to do as a mother.

She considers ringing the bell and running, but she realizes that would not be a good idea. If they catch her, she's obliged to keep the baby—that's part of the Storking Initiative too—but if they open the door and find nothing but the child, it's "finder's keepers" in the eyes of the law. Whether they want it or not, the baby is legally theirs.

From the time she learned she was pregnant she knew she would end up storking this baby. She had hoped that when she finally saw it, looking up at her so helplessly, she might change her mind—but who was she kidding? With neither the skill nor the desire to be a mother at this point in her life, storking had always been her best option.

She realizes she's lingered longer than is wise. There's an upstairs light on now, so she forces herself to look away from the sleeping newborn, and leaves. With the burden now lifted from her, she has sudden strength. She now has a second chance in life, and this time she'll be smarter—she's sure of it.

As she hurries down the street, she thinks how wonderful it is that she can get a second chance. How wonderful it is that she can dismiss her responsibility so easily.

OceanofPDF.com

10 · Risa

Several streets away from the storked newborn, at the edge of a dense wood, Risa stands at the door of a home. She rings the bell, and a woman answers in her bathrobe.

Risa offers the woman a big smile. "Hi, my name is Didi? And I'm collecting clothes and food for our school? We're, like, giving them to the homeless? And it's like this competition—whoever gets the most wins a trip to Florida or something? So it would be really, really great if you could help out?"

The sleepy woman tries to get her brain up to speed with "Didi," airhead for the homeless. The woman can't get a word in edgewise because Didi talks way too fast. If Risa had had a piece of chewing gum, she would have popped a bubble somewhere in there to add more authenticity.

"Please-please-pretty-please? I'm, like, in second place right now?"

The woman at the door sighs, resigned to the fact that "Didi" isn't going away empty-handed, and sometimes the best way to get rid of girls like this is just to give them something. "I'll be right back," the woman says.

Three minutes later, Risa walks away from the house with a bag full of clothes and canned food.

"That was amazing," says Connor, who had been watching with Lev from the edge of the woods.

"What can I say? I'm an artist," she says. "It's like playing the piano; you just have to know which keys to strike in people."

Connor smiles. "You're right, this is way better than stealing."

"Actually," says Lev, "scamming IS stealing."

Risa feels a bit prickly and uncomfortable at the thought, but tries not to show it.

"Maybe so," says Connor, "but it's stealing with style."

The woods have ended at a tract community. Manicured lawns have turned yellow along with the leaves. Autumn has truly taken hold. The homes here are almost identical, but not quite, full of people almost identical, but not quite. It's a world Risa knows about only through magazines and TV. To her, suburbia is a magical kingdom. Perhaps that's why Risa was the one who had the nerve to approach the house and pretend to be Didi. The neighborhood drew her like the smell of fresh bread baking in the industrial ovens of Ohio State Home 23.

Back in the woods where they can't be seen from anyone's window, they check their goody bag, as if it's full of Halloween candy.

There's a pair of pants and a blue button-down shirt that fits Connor. There's a jacket that fits Lev. There are no clothes for Risa, but that's okay. She can play Didi again at a different house.

"I still don't know how changing our clothes is going to make a difference." Connor asks.

"Don't you ever watch TV?" says Risa. "On the cop shows they always describe what perps were last wearing when they put out an APB."

"We're not perps," says Connor, "we're AWOLs."

"We're felons," says Lev. "Because what you're doing—I mean, what *we're* doing—is a federal crime."

"What, stealing clothes?" asks Connor.

"No, stealing ourselves. Once the unwind orders were signed, we all became government property. Kicking-AWOL makes us federal criminals."

It doesn't sit well with Risa, or for that matter with Connor, but they both shake it off.

This excursion into a populated area is dangerous but necessary. Perhaps as the morning goes on they can find a library where they can download maps and find themselves a wilderness large enough to get lost in for good. There are rumors of hidden communities of AWOL Unwinds. Maybe they can find one.

As they move cautiously through the neighborhood, a woman approaches them—just a girl, really, maybe nineteen or twenty. She walks fast, but she's walking funny, like she's got some injury or is

recovering from one. Risa's certain she's going to see them and recognize them, but the girl passes without even making eye contact and hurries around a corner.

OceanofPDF.com

11 · Connor

Exposed. Vulnerable. Connor wishes they could have stayed in the woods, but there are only so many acorns and berries he can eat. They'll find food in town. Food, and information.

"This is the best time not to be noticed," Connor tells the others. "Everyone's in a hurry in the morning. Late to work, or whatever."

Connor finds a newspaper in the bushes, misthrown by a delivery boy. "Look at this!" says Lev. "A newspaper. How retro is that?"

"Does it talk about us?" asks Lev. He says it like it's a good thing. The three of them scan the front page. The war in Australia, lying politicians—the same old stuff. Connor turns the page clumsily. Its pages are large and awkward. They tear easily and catch the breeze like a kite, making it hard to read.

No mention of them on page two, or page three.

"Maybe it's an old newspaper," suggests Risa.

Connor checks the date on top. "No, it's today's." He fights against the breeze to turn the page. "Ah—there it is."

The headline reads, PILEUP ON INTERSTATE. It's a very small article. A morning car accident, *blah-blah-blah,* traffic snarled for hours, *blah-blah-blah*. The article mentions the dead bus driver, the fact that the road was closed for three hours. But nothing about them. Connor reads the last line of the article aloud.

"It is believed that police activity in the area may have distracted drivers, leading to the accident."

They're all dumbfounded. For Connor, there's a sense of relief—a sense of having gotten away with something huge.

"That can't be right," says Lev, "I was kidnapped, or . . . uh . . . at least they *think* I was. That should be in the news."

"Lev's right," says Risa. "They always have incidents with Unwinds in the news. If we're not in there, there's a reason."

Connor can't believe these two are looking this gift horse in the mouth! He speaks slowly as if to idiots. "No news report means no pictures—and that means people won't recognize us. I don't see why that's a problem."

Risa folds her arms. "*Why* are there no pictures?"

"I don't know—maybe the police are keeping it quiet because they don't want people to know they screwed up."

Risa shakes her head. "It doesn't feel right. . . ."

"Who cares how it feels!"

"Keep your voice down!" Risa says in an angry whisper. Connor fights to keep his temper under control. He doesn't say anything for fear he's going to start yelling again and draw attention to them. He can see Risa puzzling over the situation and Lev looking back and forth between the two of them. *Risa's not stupid,* thinks Connor. *She's going to figure out that this is a good thing, and that she's worrying for nothing.*

But instead, Risa says, "If we're never in the news, then who's going to know if we live or die? See—if it's all over the news that they're tracking us, then when they find us, they have to take us down with tranquilizer bullets and take us to be harvested, right?"

Connor has no idea why she's stating the obvious. "So, what's your point?"

"What if they don't want to take us to be unwound. What if they want us dead?"

Connor opens his mouth to tell her how stupid that is, but stops himself. Because it's not stupid at all.

"Lev," says Risa, "your family's pretty rich, right?"

Lev shrugs modestly. "I guess."

"What if they paid off the police to get you back by killing the kidnappers . . . and to do it quietly, so no one ever knew it happened?"

Connor looks to Lev, hoping the kid will laugh at the very suggestion, telling them that his parents would never, ever do such a terrible thing. Lev, however, is curiously silent about it as he considers the possibility.

And at that moment two things happen. A police car turns onto the street, and somewhere very close by, a baby begins to cry.

* * *

Run!

This is the first thought in Connor's mind, his first instinct, but Risa grabs his arm tightly the moment she sees the police car, and it makes him hesitate. Connor knows hesitation can mean the difference between life and death in dire situations. But not today. Today it gives him enough time to do something Connor rarely does in an emergency. He goes beyond his first thought, and processes his *second* thought:

Running will attract attention.

He forces his feet to stay in one place, and takes a quick moment to assess their surroundings. Cars are starting in driveways as people head off to work. Somewhere a baby is crying. High-school-aged kids are gathered on a corner across the street, talking, pushing each other, laughing. As he looks to Risa, he can tell they're both of one mind, even before she says, "Bus stop!"

The patrol car rolls leisurely down the street. Leisurely, that is, to someone who has nothing to hide, but to Connor its slow pace is menacing. There's no way of telling if these officers are looking for them or just on a routine patrol. Again, he fights down the urge to run.

He and Risa turn their backs to the police car, ready to stride off inconspicuously toward the bus stop, but Lev is not with the program. He faces the wrong way, staring straight at the approaching cop car.

"What, are you nuts?" Connor grabs his shoulder and forces him around. "Just do what we do, and act natural."

A school bus approaches from the other direction. The kids at the corner begin gathering their things. Now, at last, there's permission to run without looking out of place. Connor begins it, taking a few strides ahead of Risa and Lev, then turns back, calling with a calculated whine, "C'mon, you guys—we're gonna miss the bus again!"

The cop car's right beside them now. Connor keeps his back to it and doesn't turn to see if the officers inside are watching them. If they

are, hopefully they'll just hear the conversation and assume this is normal morning mayhem, and not think twice. Lev's version of "acting natural" is walking with wide eyes and arms stiff by his side like he's crossing a minefield. So much for being inconspicuous. "Do you have to walk so slow?" Connor yells. "If I get another tardy, I'll get detention."

The squad car rolls past them. Up ahead, the bus nears the stop. Connor, Risa, and Lev hurry across the street toward it—all part of the charade, just in case the cops are watching them through their rearview mirror. Of course, thinks Connor, it could backfire on them, and the cops could cite them for jaywalking.

"Are we really going to get on the bus?" asks Lev.

"Of course not," says Risa.

Now Connor dares to glance at the cop car. Its blinker is on. It's going to turn the corner, and once it does, they'll be safe. . . . But then the school bus stops and turns on its blinking red lights as it opens its door—and anyone who's ever ridden a school bus knows that when those red lights start blinking, all traffic around them must stop and wait until the bus moves on.

The cop car comes to a halt a dozen yards short of the corner, waiting until the bus is finished loading. That means that the cop car will still be sitting right there when the bus pulls away. "We're screwed," Connor says. "Now we *have* to get on the bus."

It's as they reach the sidewalk that a sound which has been too faint and too low-priority to care about suddenly snares Connor's attention. The crying baby.

At the house in front of them, there's a bundle on the porch. The bundle is moving.

Connor instantly knows what this is. He's seen it before. He's seen a storked baby twice on his own doorstep. Even though it's not the same baby, he stops in his tracks as if it is.

"C'mon, Billy, you'll miss the bus!"

"Huh?"

It's Risa. She and Lev are a few yards ahead of him. She speaks to Connor through gritted teeth. "C'mon, 'Billy.' Don't be an idiot."

Kids have already started piling onto the bus. The police car sits motionless behind the blinking red lights.

Connor tries to make himself move, but can't. It's because of the baby. Because of the way it wails. *This is not the same baby!* Connor tells himself. *Don't be stupid. Not now!*

"Connor," whispers Risa, "what's wrong with you?"

Then the door of the house opens. There's a fat little kid at the door—six, maybe seven. He stares down at the baby. "Aw, no way!" Then he turns and calls back into the house, "Mom! We've been storked again!"

Most people have two emergency modes. Fight and Flight. But Connor always knew he had three: Fight, Flight, and Screw Up Royally. It was a dangerous mental short circuit. The same short circuit that made him race back toward armed Juvey-cops to rescue Lev instead of just saving himself. He could feel it kicking in again right now. He could feel his brain starting to fry. "We've been storked again," the fat kid had said. Why did he have to say "again"? Connor might have been all right if he hadn't said "again."

Don't do it! Connor tells himself. *This is not the same baby!*

But to some deep, unreasoning part of his brain, they're all the same baby.

Going against all sense of self-preservation, Connor bolts straight for the porch. He approaches the door so quickly, the kid looks up at him with terrified eyes and backs into his mother, an equally plump woman who has just arrived at the door. Her face wears an unwelcoming scowl. She stares at Connor, then spares a quick glance down at the crying baby, but she makes no move toward it.

"Who are you?" she demands. The little boy now hides behind her like a cub behind a mother grizzly. "Did you put this here? Answer me!" The baby continues to cry.

"No . . . No, I—"

"Don't lie to me!"

He doesn't know what he hoped to accomplish coming here. This is none of his business, not his problem. But now he's made it his problem.

And behind him the bus is still loading kids. The police car is still there, waiting. Connor could have very well just ended his life by coming to this house.

Then there's a voice behind him. "He didn't put it there. I did."

Connor turns to see Risa. Her face is stony. She won't even look at Connor. She just glares at the woman, whose beady eyes shift from Connor to Risa.

"You got caught in the act, little dearie," she says. The words "little dearie" come out like a curse. "The law might let you stork, but only if you don't get caught. So take your baby and go, before I call those cops over."

Connor tries desperately to unfry his brain. "But . . . but . . ."

"Just shut up!" says Risa, her voice full of venom and accusation.

This makes the woman at the door smile, but it's not a pleasant thing. "Daddy here ruined it for you, didn't he? He came back instead of just running away." The woman spares a quick dismissive look at Connor. "First rule of motherhood, dearie: Men are screwups. Learn it now and you'll be a whole lot happier."

Between them, the baby still cries. It's like a game of steal the bacon, where no one wants to take the bacon. Finally, Risa bends down and lifts the baby from the welcome mat, holding it close to her. It still cries, but much more softly now.

"Now get out of here," says the fat woman, "or you'll be talking to those cops."

Connor turns to see the cop car partially blocked by the school bus. Lev stands halfway in and halfway out of the bus, keeping the door from closing, a look of utter desperation on his face. The irritated bus driver peers out at him. "C'mon, I don't have all day!"

Connor and Risa turn away from the woman at the door and hurry for the bus.

"Risa, I—"

"Don't," she snaps. "I don't want to hear it."

Connor feels as broken as he did the moment he found out his parents had signed the order to unwind him. Back then, however, he had anger to help dilute the fear and the shock. But there's no anger

in him now, except for anger at himself. He feels helpless, hopeless. All of his self-confidence has imploded like a dying star. Three fugitives running from the law. And now, thanks to his short-circuit stupidity, they are three fugitives with a baby.

OceanofPDF.com

12 · Risa

She can't even begin to guess what possessed Connor.

Now Risa realizes he doesn't just make bad decisions, he makes dangerous ones. The school bus only has a few kids on it as they step on, and the driver angrily closes the door behind them, making no comment about the baby. Perhaps because it's not the only baby on the bus. Risa pushes past Lev and leads the three of them to the back. They pass another girl with her own little bundle of joy, which couldn't be any older than six months. The young mother curiously eyes them, and Risa tries not to make eye contact.

After they're sitting in the back, a few rows away from the nearest riders, Lev looks at Risa, almost afraid to ask the obvious question. Finally he says. "Uh . . . why do we have a baby?"

"Ask *him,*" says Risa.

Stone-faced, Connor looks out the window. "They're looking for two boys and a girl. Having a baby will throw them off."

"Great," snaps Risa. "Maybe we should all pick up a baby along the way."

Connor goes visibly red. He turns toward her and holds out his hands. "I'll hold it," he says, but Risa keeps it away from him.

"You'll make it cry."

Risa is no stranger to babies. At the state home she occasionally got to work with the infants. This one probably would have ended up at a state home too. She could tell that the woman at the door had no intention of keeping it.

She looks at Connor. Still red, he intentionally avoids her gaze. The reason Connor gave was a lie. Something else drove him to run to that porch. But whatever the real reason was, Connor's keeping it to himself.

The bus comes to a jarring halt and more kids get on. The girl at the front of the bus—the one with the baby—makes her way to the

back and sits right in front of Risa, turning around and looking at her over the seat back.

"Hi, you must be new! I'm Alexis, and this is Chase." Her baby looks at Risa curiously, and drools over the seat back. Alexis picks up the baby's limp hand, and makes it wave like she might wave the hand of a toy doll. "Say hello, Chase!" Alexis seems even younger than Risa.

Alexis peers around to get a look at the sleeping baby's face. "A newborn! Oh, wow! That's so brave of you, coming back to school so soon!" She turns to Connor. "Are you the father?"

"Me?" Connor looks flustered and cornered for a moment before he comes to his senses and says, "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"That's *sooooo* great that you're still seeing each other. Chaz—that's Chase's father—doesn't even go to our school anymore. He got sent to military school. His parents were so mad when they found out that I was, you know, 'uploaded,' he was afraid they might actually have him unwound. Can you believe it?"

Risa could strangle this girl if it weren't for the fact that it would leave drooling Chase motherless.

"So, is yours a boy, or a girl?"

The pause before answering is awkward and uncomfortable. Risa wonders whether or not there's a discreet way to check without Alexis seeing, but realizes there isn't. "Girl," Risa says. At least there's a 50 percent chance she's right.

"What's her name?"

This time Connor pipes up. "Didi," he says. "Her name's Didi." This brings forth a little grin from Risa in spite of how angry she is at him.

"Yeah," says Risa. "Same as me. Family tradition."

Clearly Connor has recovered at least a portion of his senses. He seems a bit more relaxed and natural, playing the role as best he can. The redness in his face has receded until it's only his ears that are red.

"Well, you're going to love Center-North High," Alexis says. "They've got a great day care center, and really take care of student-mothers. Some teachers even let us nurse in class."

Connor puts his hand over Risa's shoulder. "Do fathers get to watch?"

Risa shrugs off his arm, and quietly stomps on his foot. He winces, but says nothing. If he thought he was out of the doghouse, he's dead wrong. As far as she's concerned, his name is Fido.

"It looks like your brother is making friends," says Alexis. She looks to where Lev was sitting, but he's moved a seat ahead and is talking to boy sitting next to him. She tries to hear what they're talking about but can't hear anything beyond Alexis's blathering.

"Or is it *your* brother?" Alexis says to Connor.

"No, he's mine," says Risa.

Alexis grins and rolls her shoulders a bit. "He's kind of cute."

Risa didn't think it was possible to like Alexis any less than she already did. Apparently she was wrong. Alexis must see the look in Risa's eyes, because she says, "Well, I mean cute for a *freshman*."

"He's thirteen. He skipped a grade," Risa says, burning Alexis an even meaner warning gaze that says, *Keep your claws away from my little brother.* She has to remind herself that Lev really isn't her little brother. Now it's Connor's turn to stomp on her foot—and he's right to do it. Too much information. Lev's real age was more than Alexis needed to know. And besides, making an enemy is not in their best interests.

"Sorry," says Risa, softening her gaze. "Long night with the baby. It's made me cranky."

"Oh, believe me, I've totally been there."

It looks as if the Alexis Inquisition might continue until they reach the school, but the bus comes to another sudden stop, making little Chase bump his chin on the seat back, and he begins to cry. Suddenly Alexis goes into mother mode, and the conversation ends.

Risa heaves a deep sigh, and Connor says, "I really am sorry about this." Although he sounds sincere, she's not accepting any apologies.

OceanofPDF.com

13 · Lev

This day has not gone according to plan.

The plan was to get away as soon as they reached civilization. Lev could have run the moment they broke out of the woods. He could have, but he didn't. *There'll be a better time,* he had thought. A perfect time would present itself if he had patience, and kept watchful.

Pretending to be one of them—pretending to be *like* them had taken every ounce of Lev's will. The only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that very soon everything would be as it should be.

When the police car had turned onto the street, Lev was fully prepared to throw himself at the car and turn himself in. He would have done it if it weren't for one thing.

Their pictures weren't in the paper.

That bothered Lev even more than the others. His family was influential. They were not to be trifled with. He felt certain that his face would be the biggest thing on the front page. When it wasn't, he didn't know what to think. Even Risa's theory that his parents wanted her and Connor killed seemed a possibility.

If he gave himself up to the police, what if they turned and fired real bullets at Risa and Connor? Would the police do that? He wanted them brought to justice, but he couldn't bear the thought of their deaths on his head, so he had let the squad car go past.

And now things are worse. Now there's this baby. Stealing a storked baby! These two Unwinds are out of control. He no longer fears that they'll kill him, but that doesn't make them any less dangerous. They need to be protected from themselves. They need . . . they need . . . they need to be unwound. Yes. That's the best solution for these two. They're of no use to anyone in their current state, least of all themselves. It would probably be a relief for them, for now they're all broken up on the inside. Better to be broken up on the outside instead. That way their divided spirits could rest, knowing that their

living flesh was spread around the world, saving lives, making other people whole. Just as his own spirit would soon rest.

He ponders this as he sits on the bus, trying to deny how mixed his feelings about it are.

While Risa and Connor talk to a painfully perky girl and her baby, Lev moves one seat forward in the bus, putting more distance between them. A boy gets on the bus and sits down next to him, wearing headphones and singing to music that Lev can't hear. The kid slips his backpack in between them on the seat, practically wedging Lev in, and returns his full attention to his tunes.

That's when Lev gets an idea. He looks behind him to see Connor and Risa still involved with the other girl and her baby. Carefully Lev reaches into the kid's backpack and pulls out a dog-eared notebook. Written on it in big black letters is DEATH BY ALGEBRA, with little skulls and crossbones. Inside are messy math equations and homework graded down for sloppiness. Lev quietly turns to a blank page, then he reaches into the kid's pack again, pulling out a pen. All the while, the kid is so absorbed in his music, he doesn't notice. Lev begins to write:

HELP! I'M BEING HELD HOSTAGE
BY TWO AWOL UNWINDS.
NOD IF YOU UNDERSTAND . . .

When he's done, he tugs the boy's shoulder. It takes two tugs to get his attention.

"Yeah?"

Lev holds out the notebook, making sure he does it in such a way that it's not too obvious. The boy looks at him and says:

"Hey, that's my notebook."

Lev takes a deep breath. Connor's looking at him now. He's got to be careful. "I know it's your notebook," Lev says, trying to say as much as he can with his eyes. "I just . . . needed . . . one . . . page. . . ."

He holds the notebook a little higher for the kid to read, but the kid's not even looking at it. "No! You should have asked first." Then he rips out the page without even looking at it, crumples the paper, and to Lev's horror hurls it toward the front of the bus. The paper wad bounces off the head of another kid, who ignores it, and it falls to the

floor. The bus comes to a stop, and Lev feels his hope trampled beneath thirty pairs of scuffed shoes.

OceanofPDF.com

14 · Connor

Dozens of buses pull up to the school. Kids mob every doorway. As Connor gets off the bus with Risa and Lev, he scans for a way to escape, but there is none. There are campus security guards and teachers on patrol. Anyone seen walking away from school would draw the attention of everyone watching.

"We can't actually go in," says Risa.

"I say we do," says Lev, acting more squirrelly than usual.

A teacher has already taken notice of them. Even though the school has a day care center for student mothers, the baby is very conspicuous.

"We'll go in," says Connor. "We'll hide in a place where there aren't any security cameras. The boys' bathroom."

"Girls'," says Risa. "It'll be cleaner, and there'll be more stalls to hide in."

Connor considers it, and figures she's probably right on both counts. "Fine. We'll hide until lunch, then slip out with the rest of the kids going off campus."

"You're assuming this baby wants to cooperate," says Risa. "Eventually it's going to want to be fed—and I don't exactly have the materials, if you know what I mean. If it starts crying in the bathroom, it will probably echo throughout the whole school."

It's another accusation. Connor can hear it in her voice. It says: *Do you have any idea how much harder you've made things on us?*

"Let's just hope it doesn't cry," says Connor. "And if it does, you can blame me all the way to harvest camp."

* * *

Connor is no stranger to hiding in school bathrooms. Of course, before today, the reason was simply to get out of class. Today, however,

there's no class where he's expected, and if he's caught, the consequences are a little bit more severe than Saturday school.

They slip in after the first period bell rings and Connor coaches them on the finer points of bathroom stealth. How to tell the difference between kids' footsteps and adults'. When to lift your feet up so no one can see you, and when to just announce that the stall is occupied. The latter would work for both Risa and Lev, since his voice is still somewhat high, but Connor doesn't dare pretend to be a girl.

They stay together yet alone, each in their own stall. Mercifully, the bathroom door squeals like a pig whenever it's opened, so they have warning when anyone comes in. There are a few girls at the beginning of first period but then it quiets down and they are left with no sound but the echoing drizzle of a leaky flush handle.

"We won't make it in here until lunch," Risa announces from the stall to Connor's left. "Even if the baby stays asleep."

"You'd be surprised how long you can hide in a bathroom."

"You mean you've done this often?" asks Lev, in the stall to his right.

Connor knows this fits right into Lev's image of Connor as a bad seed. Fine, let him think that. He's probably right.

The bathroom door squeals. They fall silent. Dull, rapid footsteps—it's a student in sneakers. Lev and Connor raise their feet and Risa keeps hers down, as they had planned. The baby gurgles, and Risa clears her throat, masking the noise perfectly. The girl is in and out in less than a minute.

After the bathroom door squeaks closed, the baby coughs. Connor notices that it's a quick, clean sound. Not sickly at all. Good.

"By the way," says Risa, "it *is* a girl."

Connor thinks to offer to hold it once more, but figures right now that would be more trouble than it's worth. He doesn't know how to hold a baby to keep it from crying. Connor decides he has to tell them why he went temporarily insane and took the baby. He owes them that much.

"It was because of what the kid said," Connor says gently.

"What?"

"Back at that house—the fat kid at the door. He said they'd been storked *again*."

"So what?" says Risa. "Lots of people get storked more than once."

Then, from his other side, Connor hears, "That happened to my family. I have two brothers and a sister who were brought by the stork before I was born. It was never a problem."

Connor wonders if Lev actually thinks the stork brought them, or if he's just using it as an expression. He decides he'd rather not know. "What a wonderful family. They take in storked babies, and send their own flesh and blood to be unwound. Oh, sorry—*tithed*."

Clearly offended, Lev says, "Tithing's in the Bible; you're supposed to give 10 percent of everything. And storking's in the Bible too."

"No, it isn't!"

"Moses," says Lev. "Moses was put in a basket in the Nile and was found by Pharaoh's daughter. He was the first storked baby, and look what happened to him!"

"Yeah," says Connor, "but what happened to the next baby she found in the Nile?"

"Will you keep your voices down?" says Risa. "People could hear you in the hall, and anyway, you might wake Didi."

Connor takes a moment to collect his thoughts. When he speaks again, it's a whisper, but in a tiled room there are no whispers. "We got storked when I was seven."

"Big deal," says Risa.

"No, this *was* a big deal. For a whole lot of reasons. See, there were already two natural kids in the family. My parents weren't planning on any more. Anyway, this baby shows up at our door, my parents start freaking out . . . and then they have an idea."

"Do I want to hear this?" Risa asks.

"Probably not." But Connor's not about to stop. He knows if he doesn't spill this now, he's never going to. "It was early in the morning, and my parents figured no one saw the baby left at the door, right? So the next morning, before the rest of us got up, my dad put the baby on a doorstep across the street."

"That's illegal," announces Lev. "Once you get storked, that baby's yours."

"Yeah, but my parents figured, who's gonna know? My parents swore us to secrecy, and we waited to hear the news from across the street about their new, unexpected arrival . . . but it never came. They never talked about getting storked and we couldn't ask them about it, because it would be a dead giveaway that we'd dumped the baby on them."

As Connor speaks, the stall, as small as it is, seems to shrink around him. He knows the others are there on either side, but he can't help but feel desperately alone.

"Things go on like it never happened. Everything was quiet for a while, and then two weeks later, I open the door, and there on that stupid welcome mat, is another baby in a basket . . . and I remember . . . I remember I almost laughed. Can you believe it? I thought it was funny, and I turned back to my mother, and I say 'Mom, we got storked again'—just like that little kid this morning said. My Mom, all frustrated, brought the baby in . . . and that's when she realizes—"

"Oh, no!" says Risa, figuring it out even before Connor says:

"It's the same baby!" Connor tries to remember the baby's face, but he can't. All he sees in his mind's eye is the face of the baby Risa now holds. "It turns out that the baby had been passed around the neighborhood for two whole weeks—each morning, left on someone else's doorstep . . . only now it's not looking too good."

The bathroom door squeals, and Connor falls silent. A flurry of footsteps. Two girls. They chat a bit about boys and dates and parties with no parents around. They don't even use the toilets. Another flurry of footsteps heading out, the squeal of the door, and they are alone again.

"So, what happened to the baby?" Risa asks.

"By the time it landed on our doorstep again, it was sick. It was coughing like a seal and its skin and eyes were yellow."

"Jaundice," says Risa, gently. "A lot of babies show up at StaHo that way."

"My parents brought it to the hospital, but there was nothing they could do. I was there when it died. I *saw* it die." Connor closes his eyes, and grits his teeth, to keep tears back. He knows the others can't see them, but he doesn't want them to come anyway. "I remember thinking, if a baby was going to be so unloved, why would God want it brought into the world?"

He wonders if Lev will have some pronouncement on the topic—after all, when it comes to God, Lev claimed to have all the answers. But all Lev says is, "I didn't know you believed in God."

Connor takes a moment to push his emotions down, then continues. "Anyway, since it was legally ours, we paid for the funeral. It didn't even have a name, and my parents couldn't bear to give it one. It was just 'Baby Lassiter,' and even though no one had wanted it, the entire neighborhood came to the funeral. People were crying like it was their baby that had died. . . . And that's when I realized that the people who were crying—they were the ones who had passed that baby around. They were the ones, just like my own parents, who had a hand in killing it."

There's silence now. The leaky flush handle drizzles. Next door in the boys' bathroom a toilet flushes, and the sound echoes hollowly around them.

"People shouldn't give away babies that get left at their door," Lev finally says.

"People shouldn't stork their babies," Risa responds.

"People shouldn't do a lot of things," says Connor. He knows they're both right, but it doesn't make a difference. In a perfect world mothers would all want their babies, and strangers would open up their homes to the unloved. In a perfect world everything would be either black or white, right or wrong, and everyone would know the difference. But this isn't a perfect world. The problem is people who think it is.

"Anyway, I just wanted you to know."

In a few moments the bell rings, and there's commotion in the hall. The bathroom door creaks open. Girls laughing, talking about everything and nothing.

"Next time wear a dress."

"Can I borrow your history book?"

"That test was impossible."

Unending squeals from the door and constant tugs on Connor's locked stall door. No one's tall enough to look over, no one has any desire to look under. The late bell rings; the last girl hurries to class. They've made it to second period. If they're lucky, this school will have a midmorning break. Maybe they can sneak out then. In Risa's stall, the baby is making wakeful noises. Not crying but sort of clicking. On the verge of hungry tears.

"Should we change stalls?" asks Risa. "Repeat visitors might get suspicious if they see my feet in the same stall."

"Good idea." Listening closely to make sure he can't hear any footfalls in the hall, Connor pulls open his stall, switching places with Risa. Lev's door is open as well, but he's not coming out. Connor pushes Lev's door open all the way. He's not there.

"Lev?" He looks to Risa, who just shakes her head. They check every stall, then check the one Lev was in again, as if he might reappear—but he doesn't. Lev is gone. And the baby begins wailing for all it's worth.

OceanofPDF.com

15 · Lev

Lev is convinced his heart will explode in his chest.

It will explode, and he will die right here in a school hallway. Slipping out of the bathroom once the bell rang had been nerve-racking. He had unlocked his stall door, and had kept his hand on the handle for ten minutes waiting for the electronic buzz of the bell to mask the sound of its opening. Then he'd had to make it to the bathroom entrance without the others hearing his brand-new sneakers squeaking on the floor. (Why did they call them sneakers if it was so hard to sneak in them?) He couldn't open that squealing door, then walk out by himself. It would be too conspicuous. So he waited until a bathroom-bound girl did it for him. Since the bell had just rung, he only had to wait a few seconds. She pulled open the door and he pushed his way past her, hoping she didn't say anything that would give him away. If she commented about a boy being in the girl's bathroom, Connor and Risa would know.

"Next time, wear a dress," the girl said to him as he hurried away, and her friend laughed. Was that enough to alert Connor and Risa to his escape? He hadn't turned back to find out, he had just pressed forward.

Now he's lost in the hallways of the huge high school, his heart threatening to detonate at any second. A wild mob of kids hurrying to their next class surround him, bump him, disorient him. Most of the kids here are bigger than Lev. Imposing. Intimidating. This is how he always imagined high school—a dangerous place full of mystery and violent kids. He had never worried about it because he had always known he would never have to go. In fact, he only had to worry about getting partway through eighth grade.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the office is?" he asks one of the slower-moving students.

The kid looks down at him as if Lev were from Mars. "How could you not know that?" And he just walks away shaking his head.

Another, kinder kid points him in the right direction.

Lev knows that things must be put back on track. This is the best place to do it: a school. If there are any secret plans to kill Connor and Risa, it can't happen here with so many kids around, and if he does this right, it won't happen at all. If he does it right, all three of them will be safely on their way to their unwinding, as it ought to be. As it was *ordained* to be. The thought of it still frightens him, but these days of not knowing what the next hour will bring—that is truly terrifying. Being torn from his purpose was the most unnerving thing that had ever happened to Lev, but now he understands why God let it happen. It's a lesson. It's to show Lev what happens to children who shirk their destiny: They become lost in every possible way.

He enters the school's main office and stands at the counter, waiting to be noticed, but the secretary is too busy shuffling papers. "Excuse me . . ."

Finally, she looks up. "Can I help you, dear?"

He clears his throat. "My name is Levi Calder, and I've been kidnapped by two runaway Unwinds."

The woman, who really wasn't paying attention before, suddenly focuses her attention entirely on him. "What did you say?"

"I was kidnapped. We were hiding in a bathroom, but I got away. They're still there. They've got a baby, too."

The woman stands up and calls out, her voice shaky, like she's looking at a ghost. She calls in the principal, and the principal calls in a security guard.

* * *

A minute later, Lev sits in the nurse's office, with the nurse doting on him like he's got a fever.

"Don't you worry," she says. "Whatever happened to you, it's all over now."

From here in the nurse's office, Lev has no way of knowing if they've captured Connor and Risa. He hopes that, if they have, they don't bring them here. The thought of having to face them makes him feel ashamed. Doing the right thing shouldn't make you ashamed.

"The police have been called, everything's being taken care of," the nurse tells him. "You'll be going home soon."

"I'm not going home," he tells her. The nurse looks at him strangely, and he decides not to go into it. "Never mind. Can I call my parents?"

She looks at him, incredulous. "You mean, no one's done that for you?" She looks at the school phone in the corner, then fumbles for the cell phone in her pocket instead. "You call and let them know you're okay—and talk as long as you like."

She looks at him for a moment, then decides to give him his privacy, stepping out of the room. "I'll be right here if you need me."

Lev begins to dial, but stops himself. It's not his parents he wants to talk to. He erases the numbers and keys in a different one, hesitates for a moment, then hits the send button.

It's picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Pastor Dan?"

There's only a split second of dead air, and then recognition. "Dear God, Lev? Lev, is that you? Where are you?"

"I don't know. Some school. Listen, you have to tell my parents to stop the police! I don't want them killed."

"Lev, slow down. Are you all right?"

"They kidnapped me—but they didn't hurt me, so I don't want them hurt. Tell my father to call off the police!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. We never told the police."

Lev is not expecting to hear this. "You never . . . what?"

"Your parents were going to. They were going to make a whole big deal about it—but I convinced them not to. I convinced them that your being kidnapped was somehow God's will."

Lev starts shaking his head like he can shake the thought away. "But . . . but why would you do that?"

Now Pastor Dan starts to sound desperate. "Lev, listen to me. Listen to me carefully. *No one else knows that you're gone*. As far as anyone knows, you've been tithed, and people don't ask questions about children who are tithed. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"But . . . I want to be tithed. I *need* to be. You have to call my parents and tell them. You have to get me to harvest camp."

Now Pastor Dan gets angry. *"Don't make me do that! Please, don't make me do that!"* It's as if he's fighting a battle, but somehow it's not Lev he's battling. This is so far from Lev's image of Pastor Dan, he can't believe it's the same person he's known all these years. It's like an impostor has stolen the Pastor's voice, but none of his convictions.

"Don't you see, Lev? You can save yourself. You can be anyone you want to be now."

And all at once the truth comes to Lev. Pastor Dan wasn't telling him to run away from the kidnapper that day—he was telling Lev to run away from *him*. From his parents. From his tithing. After all of his sermons and lectures, after all that talk year after year about Lev's holy duty, it's all been a sham. Lev was born to be tithed—and the man who convinced him this was a glorious and honorable fate doesn't believe it.

"Lev? Lev, are you there?"

He's there, but he doesn't want to be. He doesn't want to answer this man who led him to a cliff only to turn away at the last minute. Now Lev's emotions spin like a wheel of fortune. One moment he's furious, the next, relieved. One instant he's filled with terror so extreme, he can smell it like acid in his nostrils, and the next, there's a spike of joy, like what he used to feel when he swung away and heard the crack of his bat against a ball. He is that ball now, soaring away. His life has been like a ballpark, hasn't it? All lines, structure, and rules, never changing. But now he's been hit over the wall into unknown territory.

"Lev?" says Pastor Dan. "You're scaring me. Talk to me."

Lev takes a slow, deep breath, then says, "Good-bye, sir." Then he hangs up without another word.

Lev sees police cars arrive outside. Connor and Risa will soon be caught, if they haven't been caught already. The nurse is no longer standing at the door—she's chiding the principal for how he's handling this situation. "Why didn't you call the poor boy's parents? Why haven't you put the school in lockdown?"

Lev knows what he has to do. It's something wrong. It's something bad. But suddenly he doesn't care. He slips out of the office right behind the nurse's and principal's backs, and goes out into the hallway. It only takes a second to find what he's looking for. He reaches for the little box on the wall.

I am lost in every possible way.

Then, feeling the coldness of the steel against his fingertips, he pulls the fire alarm.

OceanofPDF.com

16 · Teacher

The fire alarm goes off during the teacher's prep period, and she silently curses the powers that be for their awful timing. Perhaps, she thinks, if she can just stay in her empty classroom until the false alarm—and it's always a false alarm—is dealt with. But then, what kind of example would she be setting if students passing by looked in to see her sitting there.

As she leaves the room, the hallways are already filling with students. Teachers try their best to keep them organized, but this is a high school; the organized lines of elementary school fire drills are long gone, having been replaced by the brazen hormonal zigzags of kids whose bodies are too big for their own good.

Then she sees something strange. Something troubling.

There are two policemen by the front office—they actually seem intimidated by the mob of kids flowing past them and out the front doors of the school. But why policemen? Why not firemen? And how could they have gotten here so quickly? They couldn't have—they must have been called before the alarm went off. But why?

The last time there were policemen in the school, someone called in a clapper threat. The school was evacuated, and no one knew why until after the fact. Turns out, there was no clapper—the school was never in danger of being blown up. It was just some kid pulling a practical joke. Still, clapper threats are always taken seriously, because you never know when the threat might be real.

"Please, no pushing!" she says to a student who bumps her elbow. "I'm sure we'll all make it outside." Good thing she didn't take her coffee.

"Sorry, Ms. Steinberg."

As she passes one of the science labs, she notices the door ajar. Just to be thorough, she peeks in to make sure there are no stragglers, or kids trying to avoid the mass exodus. The stone-top tables are bare and

the chairs are all in place. No one had been in the lab this period. She reaches to pull the door closed, more out of habit than anything else, when she hears a sound that is wholly out of place in the room.

A baby's cry.

At first she thinks it might be coming from the student mother nursery, but the nursery is way down the hall. This cry definitely came from the lab. She hears the cry again, only this time it sounds oddly muffled, and angrier. She knows that sound. Someone's trying to cover the baby's mouth to keep it from crying. These teen mothers always do that when they have their babies where they don't belong. They never seem to realize it only makes the baby cry louder.

"Party's over," she calls out. "C'mon, you and your baby have to leave with everyone else."

But they don't come out. There's that muffled cry again, followed by some intense whispering that she can't quite make out. Annoyed, she steps into the lab and storms down the center aisle looking left and right until she finds them crouched behind one of the lab tables. It's not just a girl and a baby; there's a boy there too. There's a look of desperation about them. The boy looks as if he might bolt, but the girl grabs him firmly with her free hand. It keeps him in place. The baby wails.

The teacher might not know every name in school, but she's fairly certain she knows every face—and she certainly knows all the student mothers. This isn't one of them, and the boy is completely unfamiliar too.

The girl looks at her, eyes pleading. Too frightened to speak, she just shakes her head. It's the boy who speaks.

"If you turn us in, we'll die."

At the thought, the girl holds the baby closer to her. Its cries lessen, but don't go away entirely. Clearly these are the ones the police are looking for, for reasons she can only guess at.

"Please . . . ," says the boy.

Please what? the teacher thinks. *Please break the law? Please put myself and the school at risk?* But, no, that's not it at all. What he's really saying is: *Please be a human being.* With a life so full of rules

and regiments, it's so easy to forget that's what they are. She knows—she *sees*—how often compassion takes a back seat to expediency.

Then a voice from behind her: "Hannah?"

She turns to see another teacher looking in from the door. He's a bit disheveled, having fought the raging rapids of kids still funneling out of the school. He obviously hears the baby's cries—how could he not?

"Is everything all right?" he asks.

"Yeah," says Hannah, with more calm in her voice than she actually feels. "I'm taking care of it."

The other teacher nods and leaves, probably glad not to share the burden of whatever this crying baby situation is. Hannah now knows what the situation is, however—or at least she suspects. Kids only have this kind of desperation in their eyes when they're going to be unwound.

She holds out her hand to the frightened kids. "Come with me." The kids are hesitant, so she says, "If they're looking for you, they'll find you once the building is empty. You can't expect to hide here. If you want to get out, you have to leave with everyone else. C'mon, I'll help you."

Finally, they rise from behind the lab table, and she breathes a sigh of relief. She can tell they still don't trust her—but then, why should they? Unwinds exist in the constant shadow of betrayal. Well, they don't need to trust her now, they just need to go with her. In this case, necessity is the mother of compliance, and that's just fine.

"Don't tell me your names," she says to them. "Don't tell me anything, so if they question me afterward, I won't be lying when I say I don't know."

There are still crowds of kids pushing past in the hall, heading toward the nearest exit. She steps out of the room, making sure the two kids and their baby are right behind her. She will help them. Whoever they are, she will do her best to get them to safety. What kind of example would she be setting if she didn't?

OceanofPDF.com

17 · Risa

Police down the hall! Police at the exits! Risa knows this is Lev's doing. He didn't just run away, he turned them in. This teacher says she's helping them, but what if she's not? What if she's just leading them to the police?

Don't think about that now! Keep your eyes on the baby.

Policemen know panic when they see it. But if her eyes are turned to the baby, her panic might be read as concern for the baby's tears.

"If I ever see Lev again," says Connor, "I'll tear him to pieces."

"Shh," says the teacher, leading them along with the crowd to the exit.

Risa can't blame Connor for his anger. She blames herself for not seeing through Lev's sham. How could she have been so naive to think he was truly on their side?

"We should have let the little creep be unwound," grumbles Connor.

"Shut up," says Risa. "Let's just get out of this."

As they near the door, another policeman comes into view standing just outside.

"Give me the baby," the teacher orders, and Risa does as she's told. She doesn't yet realize why the woman asked for the baby, but it doesn't matter. It's wonderful to have *someone* leading the way who seems to know what they're doing. Perhaps this woman isn't the enemy after all. Perhaps she truly will get them through this.

"Let me go ahead," the teacher says. "The two of you separate, and just walk out with the rest of the kids."

Without the baby to look at, Risa knows she can't hide the panic in her eyes, but suddenly she realizes that it might not matter—and now she understands why the woman took the baby. Yes, Lev turned them in. But if they're lucky, these local police may only have a description of them to go by: a scruffy-haired boy and a dark-haired girl with a

baby. Take away the baby, and that could be half the kids in this school.

The teacher—Hannah—passes the policeman a few yards ahead of them, and he gives her only a momentary glance. But then he looks toward Risa, and his eyes lock on her. Risa knows she's just given herself away. Should she turn and race back into the school? Where's Connor now? Is he behind her, in front of her? She has no idea. She's completely alone.

And then salvation arrives in a most unlikely form.

"Hi, Didi!"

It's Alexis, the talkative girl from the school bus! She comes up beside her, with Chaz gnawing at her shoulder. "People pull the alarms all the time," she says. "Well, at least I got out of Math."

Suddenly the policeman's eyes shift to Alexis.

"Stop right there, miss."

Alexis looks stunned. "Who, me?"

"Step aside. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Risa walks right on past, holding her breath for fear that her gasp of relief might draw the officer's attention again. Risa no longer fits the profile of what they're looking for . . . but Alexis does! Risa doesn't look back; she just continues down the steps to the street.

In a few moments Connor catches up with her. "I saw what happened back there. Your friend may have just saved your life."

"I'll have to thank her later."

Up ahead, Hannah reaches into her pocket with her free hand, pulls out her car keys, then turns left toward the faculty parking lot. *It's all going to be okay,* Risa thinks. *She's going to get us out of here.* Risa might just start believing in miracles, and angels. . . . And then she hears a familiar voice behind her.

"Wait! Stop!"

She turns to see Lev—he's spotted them—and although he's far away, he's quickly working his way through the crowd toward them.

"Risa! Connor! Wait!"

It wasn't enough to just turn them in, now he's leading the cops directly to them—and he's not the only one. Alexis still stands with the

policeman at the school's side entrance. From where she stands she can easily see Risa, and she points Risa out to the cop. The cop instantly pulls out his radio to inform the other officers.

"Connor, we're in trouble."

"I know—I see it too."

"Wait!" screams Lev, still far away, but getting closer.

Risa looks for Hannah, but she's vanished into the crowd of kids in the parking lot.

Connor looks at Risa, fear overwhelming the fury in his eyes. "Run."

This time Risa doesn't hesitate. She runs with him, breaking toward the street just as a fire truck bursts onto the scene, siren blaring. The truck stops right in their path. There's nowhere to run. The fire alarm had mercifully been pulled at the perfect time, and it's gotten them this far, but the commotion is fading. Kids are milling instead of moving, and cops in every direction zero in on the two of them.

What they need is a fresh commotion. Something even worse than a fire alarm.

The answer comes even before Risa can formulate the entire idea in her mind. She speaks without even knowing what she's about to say.

"Start clapping!"

"What?"

"Start clapping. Trust me!"

A single nod from Connor makes it clear that he gets it, and he begins bringing his hands together, slowly at first, then more and more quickly. She does the same, both of them applauding as if they were at a concert cheering for their favorite band.

And beside them, a student drops his backpack and stares at them in utter horror.

"Clappers!" he screams.

In an instant the word is out.

ClappersClappersClappers . . .

It echoes in the kids around them. In an instant it reaches critical mass, and the entire crowd is in full-blown panic.

“Clappers!” everyone screams, and the crowd becomes a stampede. Kids bolt, but no one is sure where to go. All they know is that they must get away from the school as quickly as possible.

Risa and Connor continue to clap, their hands red from the force of their duet of applause. With the mob racing in blind terror, the cops can’t get to them. Lev has vanished, trampled by the panicked mob, and everything is made worse by the fire siren, which blares like it’s sounding out the end of the world.

They stop clapping and join the stampede, becoming a part of the running crowd.

That’s when someone comes up beside them. It’s Hannah. Her plans of driving them off campus are gone, so she quickly hands Risa the baby.

“There’s an antique shop on Fleming Street,” she tells them. “Ask for Sonia. She can help you.”

“We’re not clappers,” is all Risa can think to say.

“I know you’re not. Good luck.”

There’s no time to thank her. In a moment the wild crowd pulls them apart, taking Hannah in a different direction. Risa stumbles and realizes they’re in the middle of the street. Traffic has come to a halt as hundreds of kids race in a mad frenzy to escape the terrorists, wherever they are. The baby in Risa’s arms bawls, but its cries are nothing compared to the screams of the mob. In a moment they are across the street, and gone with the crowd.

OceanofPDF.com

18 · Lev

This is the true meaning of alone: Lev Calder beneath the trampling feet of a stampeding crowd.

"Risa! Connor! Help!"

He should never have called out their names, but it's too late to change that now. They ran from him when he called. They didn't wait—they ran. They hate him. They know what he did. Now hundreds of feet race over Lev like he's not there. His hand is stomped on, a boot comes down on his chest, and a kid springboards off of him to get greater speed.

Clappers. They're all screaming about clappers, just because he pulled the stupid alarm.

He has to catch up with Risa and Connor. He has to explain, to tell them that he's sorry—that he was wrong to turn them in and that he pulled the alarm to help them escape. He has to make them understand. They are his only friends now. They were. But not anymore. He's ruined everything.

Finally, the stampede thins out enough for Lev to pick himself up. A knee of his jeans is torn. He tastes blood—he must have bitten his tongue. He tries to assess the situation. Most of the mob is off campus, in the street and beyond, disappearing down side streets. Only stragglers are left.

"Don't just stand there," says a kid hurrying past. "There are clappers on the roof!"

"No," says another kid, "I heard they're in the cafeteria."

All around Lev, the bewildered cops pace with a false determination in their stride, as if they know exactly where to go, only to turn around and pace with the same determination in another direction.

Connor and Risa have left him.

He realizes that if he doesn't leave now with the last of the stragglers, he'll draw the attention of the police.

He runs away, feeling more helpless than a storked baby. He doesn't know who to blame for this: Pastor Dan for cutting him loose? Himself for betraying the only two kids willing to help him? Or should he blame God for allowing his life to reach this bitter moment? *You can be anyone you want to be now,* Pastor Dan had said. But right now, Lev feels like no one.

This is the true meaning of alone: Levi Jedediah Calder suddenly realizing he no longer exists.

OceanofPDF.com

19 · Connor

The antique shop is in an older part of town. Trees arch over the street, their branches cut into unnatural angular patterns by the profiles of passing trucks. The street is full of yellow and brown leaves, but enough diehards still cling to the branches to make a shady canopy.

The baby is inconsolable, and Connor wants to complain to Risa about it, but knows that he can't. If it hadn't been for him, the baby wouldn't even be part of the equation.

There aren't all that many people on the street, but there are enough. Mostly it's kids from the high school just knocking around, probably spreading more rumors about clappers trying to detonate themselves.

"I hear they're anarchists."

"I hear it's some weird religion."

"I hear they just do it to do it."

The threat of clappers is so effective because no one knows what they really stand for.

"That was smart back there," Connor tells Risa, as they approach the antique shop. "Pretending to be clappers, I mean. I would never have thought of that."

"You thought quickly enough to take out that Juvey-cop the other day with his own tranq gun."

Connor grins. "I go by instinct, you go by brains. I guess we make a pretty decent team."

"Yeah. And we're a bit less dysfunctional without Lev."

At the mention of Lev, Connor feels a spike of anger. He rubs his sore arm where Lev bit him—but what Lev did today was much more painful than that. "Forget about him. He's history. We got away, so his squealing on us doesn't matter. Now he'll get unwound, just like he wants, and we won't have to deal with him again." And yet the thought

of it brings Connor a pang of regret. He had risked his life for Lev. He had tried to save him, but had failed. Maybe if Connor were better with words, he could have said something that would have truly won him over. But who is he kidding? Lev was a tithe from the moment he was born. You don't undo thirteen years of brainwashing in two days.

The antique shop is old. White paint peels from the front door. Connor pushes open the door, and bells hanging high on the door jingle. Low-tech intruder alert. There's one customer: a sour-faced man in a tweed coat. He looks up at them, disinterested and maybe disgusted by the baby, because he wanders deeper into the recesses of the cluttered store to get away.

The shop has things from perhaps every point in American history. A display of iPods and other little gadgets from his grandfather's time cover an old chrome-rimmed dinner table. An old movie plays on an antique plasma-screen TV. The movie shows a crazy vision of a future that never came, with flying cars and a white-haired scientist.

"Can I help you?"

An old woman as hunched as a question mark comes out from behind the cash register. She walks with a cane, but she seems pretty surefooted in spite of it.

Risa bounces the baby to get its volume down. "We're looking for Sonia."

"You found her. What do you want?"

"We . . . uh . . . we need some help," Risa says.

"Yeah," Connor chimes in, "Someone told us to come here."

The old woman looks at them suspiciously. "Does this have something to do with that fiasco over at the high school? Are you clappers?"

"Do we look like clappers to you?" says Connor.

The woman narrows her eyes at him. "Nobody *looks* like a clapper."

Connor narrows his gaze to match hers, then goes over to the wall. He holds up his hand and jabs it forward with all his might, punching the wall hard enough to bruise his knuckles. A little painting of a fruit bowl falls off the wall. Connor catches it before it hits the ground and sets it on the counter.

“See?” he says. “My blood isn’t explosive. If I were a clapper, this whole shop would be gone.”

The old woman stares at him, and it’s a hard gaze for Connor to hold—there’s some sort of fire in those weary eyes. But Connor doesn’t look away. “See this hunch?” she asks them. “I got it from sticking my neck out for people like you.”

Connor still won’t break his gaze. “Guess we came to the wrong place, then.” Glancing at Risa, he says, “Let’s get out of here.”

He turns to leave, and the old woman swings her cane sharply and painfully across his shins. “Not so fast. It just so happens that Hannah called me, so I knew you were coming.”

Risa, still bouncing the baby, lets out a frustrated breath. “You could have told us when we came in.”

“What fun would that be?”

By now the sour-faced customer has made his way closer again, picking up item after item, his expression showing instant disapproval of everything in the shop.

“I have some lovely infant items in the back room,” she tells them loud enough for the customer to hear. “Why don’t you go back there, and wait for me?” Then she whispers, “And for God’s sake, feed that baby!”

The back room is through a doorway covered by what looks like an old shower curtain. If the front room was cluttered, this place is a disaster area. Things like broken picture frames and rusty birdcages are piled all around—all the items that weren’t good enough to be displayed out front. The junk of the junk.

“And you’re telling me this old woman is going to help us?” says Connor. “It looks like she can’t even help herself!”

“Hannah said she would. I believe her.”

“How could you be raised in a state home and still trust people?”

Risa gives him a dirty look and says, “Hold this.” She puts the baby in Connor’s arms. It’s the first time she’s given it to him. It feels much lighter than he expected. Something so loud and demanding ought to be heavier. The baby’s cries have weakened now—it’s just about exhausted itself.

There's nothing keeping them tied to this baby anymore. They could stork it again first thing in the morning. . . . And yet the thought makes Connor uncomfortable. They don't owe this baby anything. It's theirs by stupidity, not biology. He doesn't want it, but he can't stand the thought of someone getting the baby who wants it even less than he does. His frustration begins to ferment into anger. It's the same kind of anger that always got him into trouble back home. It would cloud his judgment, making him lash out, getting into fights, cursing out teachers, or riding his skateboard wildly through busy intersections. "Why do you have to get wound so tight?" his father once asked, exasperated, and Connor had snapped back, "Maybe someone oughta unwind me." At the time, he thought he was just being funny.

Risa opens a refrigerator, which is as cluttered as the rest of the back room. She pulls out a container of milk, then finds a bowl, into which she pours the milk.

"It's not a cat," Connor says. "It won't lick milk out of a bowl."

"I know what I'm doing."

Connor watches as she rummages around in drawers until finding a clean spoon. Then she takes the baby from him. Sitting down, she cradles the baby a bit more skillfully than Connor, then she dips the spoon into the milk and spills the spoonful into the baby's mouth. The baby begins to gag on the milk, coughing and sputtering, but then Risa puts her index finger into its mouth. It sucks on her finger and closes its eyes, satisfied. In a few moments, she crooks her finger enough to leave a little space for her to spill in another spoonful of milk, then lets the baby suck on her finger again.

"Wow, that's impressive," says Connor.

"Sometimes I got to take care of babies at StaHo. You learn a few tricks. Let's just hope it's not lactose intolerant."

With the baby quieted, it's as if all the day's tension has been suddenly released. Connor's eyelids grow heavy, but he won't allow himself to fall asleep. They're not safe yet. They may never be, and he can't let his guard down now. Still, his mind begins to drift off. He wonders if his parents are still looking for him, or if it's just the police

now. He thinks about Ariana. What would have happened to them if she had come along with him, as she had promised? They would have been caught on that first night—that's what would have happened. Ariana wasn't street-smart like Risa. She wasn't resourceful. Thoughts of Ariana bring a wave of sadness and longing, but it's not as powerful a feeling as Connor thought it would be. How soon until she forgets him? How soon until everyone forgets him? Not long. That's what happens with Unwinds. Connor had known other kids at school who disappeared over the past couple of years. One day they just didn't turn up. Teachers would say that they were "gone" or "no longer enrolled." Those were just code words, though. Everyone knew what they meant. The kids who knew them would talk about how terrible it was, and gripe about it for a day or two, and then it became old news. Unwinds didn't go out with a bang—they didn't even go out with a whimper. They went out with the silence of a candle flame pinched between two fingers.

The customer finally leaves, and Sonia joins them in the back room. "So, you're Unwinds and you want my help, is that it?"

"Maybe just some food," says Connor, "a place to rest for a few hours. Then we'll be on our way."

"We don't want to be any trouble," says Risa.

The old woman laughs at that. "Yes, you do! You want to be trouble to everyone you meet." She points her cane at Risa. "That's what you are now. TROUBLE in caps-lock." Then she puts her cane down, and softens a bit. "That's not your fault, though. You didn't ask to be born, and you didn't ask to be unwound, either." She looks back and forth between the two of them, then says to Risa just as bald-faced as can be: "If you really want to stay alive, honey, have him get you pregnant again. They won't unwind an expectant mother, so that will buy you nine whole months."

Risa drops her jaw, speechless, and Connor feels a flush come to his face. "She . . . she wasn't pregnant the first time. It's not her baby. Or mine."

Sonia considers this and takes a closer look at the baby. "Not yours, hmm? Well, that explains why you're not breast-feeding." She laughs

suddenly and sharply. It makes Connor and the baby jump.

Risa isn't startled, just annoyed. She gets the baby's attention again with another spoonful of milk and her index finger. "Are you going to help us or not?"

Sonia lifts her cane and raps it against Connor's arm, then points to a huge trunk covered with travel stickers. "Think you're boeuf enough to bring that over here?"

Connor gets up, wondering what could possibly be of use to them in the trunk. He grabs on to it and struggles to push it across the faded Persian rug.

"Not much of a boeuf, are ya?"

"I never said I was."

He inches the trunk across the floor until it's right in front of her. Instead of opening it, she sits on top of it and begins to massage her ankles.

"So what's in it?" Connor asks.

"Correspondence," she says. "But it's not what's in it that matters. It's what's underneath." Then with her cane she pushes away the rug where the trunk had been to reveal a trapdoor with a brass pull-ring.

"Go on," says Sonia, pointing again with her cane. Connor sighs and grabs the ring, pulling open the trapdoor to reveal steep stone steps leading down into darkness. Risa puts down her bowl and, holding the baby over her shoulder in burping position, approaches the trapdoor, kneeling beside Connor.

"This is an old building," Sonia tells them. "Way back in the early twentieth century, during the first Prohibition, they hid hooch down there."

"Hooch?" asks Connor.

"Alcohol! I swear, this whole generation's the same. Caps-lock IGNORANT!"

The steps down are steep and uneven. At first Connor thinks Sonia will send them down alone, but she insists on leading the way. She takes her time, and seems more surefooted on the steps than she does on level ground. Connor tries to hold her arm to give her support, but

she shakes him off, and throws him a nasty gaze. "If I want your help, I'll ask. Do I look feeble to you?"

"Actually, yes."

"Looks are deceiving," she says. "After all, when I saw you, I thought you looked reasonably intelligent."

"Very funny."

At the bottom, Sonia reaches toward the wall and throws a light switch.

Risa gasps, and Connor follows her gaze until he sees them. Three figures. A girl and two boys.

"Your little family has just grown," Sonia tells them.

The kids don't move. They appear to be close to Connor's and Risa's age. Fellow Unwinds, for sure. They look wary and exhausted. Connor wonders if he looks as bad.

"For God's sake, stop staring," she says to them. "You look like a pack of rats."

Sonia shuffles around the dusty cellar, pointing things out to Risa and Connor. "There are canned goods on these shelves, and a can opener around somewhere. Eat whatever you want, but don't leave anything over or you really will see rats. Bathroom's back there. Keep it clean. I'll go out in a bit and get some formula and a baby bottle." She glances at Connor. "Oh, and there's a first-aid kit around here somewhere for the bite on your arm, whatever *that's* all about."

Connor suppresses a grin. Sonia doesn't miss a thing.

"How much longer?" asks the oldest of the three cellar-rats, a muscular guy who looks at Connor with intense distrust, as if Connor might challenge his role as alpha male or something.

"What do you care?" says Sonia. "You got a pressing appointment?"

The kid doesn't respond; he just glares at Sonia and crosses his arms, displaying a shark tattooed on his forearm. *Ooh,* thinks Connor with a smirk. *Intimidating. Now I'm* really *scared.*

Sonia sighs. "Four more days until I'm rid of you for good."

"What happens in four days?" Risa asks.

"The ice cream man comes." And with that, Sonia climbs up the stairs faster than Connor thought she'd be able to. The trapdoor bangs

closed.

"Dear, sweet Dragon Lady won't tell us what happens next," says the second boy, a lanky blond kid with a faint smirk that seems permanently fixed on his face. He has braces on teeth that don't appear to need them. Although his eyes tell of sleepless nights, his hair is perfect. Connor can tell that this kid, despite the rags he's wearing, comes from money.

"We get sent to harvest camp and they cut us apart, that's what happens next," says the girl. She's Asian, and looks almost as tough as the kid with the tattoo, with hair dyed a deep shade of pink and a spiked leather choker on her neck.

Shark Boy looks at her sharply. "Will you shut up with your end-of-the-world crap?" Connor notices that the kid has four parallel scratch marks on one side of his face, consistent with fingernails. The girl has a black eye.

"It's not the end of the world," she grumbles. "Just the end of us."

"You're beautiful when you're nihilistic," says the smirker.

"Shut up."

"You're only saying that because you don't know what nihilistic means."

Risa gives Connor a look, and he knows what she's thinking. *We have to suffer through four days with this crew?* Still, she's the first to hold out her hand to them and introduce herself. Reluctantly, Connor does the same.

Turns out, each of these kids, just like every Unwind, has a story that ranks a ten on the Kleenex scale.

The smirker is Hayden. As Connor predicted, he comes from a ridiculously wealthy family. When his parents got a divorce, there was a brutal custody battle over him. Two years and six court dates later, it still wasn't resolved. In the end the only thing his mother and father could agree on was that each would rather see Hayden unwound than allow the other parent to have custody.

"If you could harness the energy of my parents' spite," Hayden tells them, "you could power a small city for several years."

The girl is Mai. Her parents kept trying for a boy, until they finally got one—but not before having four girls first. Mai was the fourth. "It's nothing new," Mai tells them. "Back in China, in the days when they only allowed one kid per family, people were killing off their baby girls left and right."

The big kid is Roland. He had dreams of being a military boeuf but apparently had too much testosterone, or steroids, or a combination of both, leaving him a little too scary even for the military. Like Connor, Roland got into fights at school—although Connor suspected Roland's fights were much, much worse. That's not what did him in, though. Roland had beaten up his stepfather for beating his mom. The mother took her husband's side, and the stepfather got off with a warning. Roland, on the other hand, was sent to be unwound.

"That's so unfair," Risa tells him.

"Like what happened to you is any fairer?" says Connor.

Roland fixes his gaze on Connor. It's emotional stone. "You keep talking to her in that tone of voice, maybe she'll find herself a new boyfriend."

Connor smiles with mocking warmth at him, and glances at the tattoo on his wrist. "I like your dolphin."

Roland is not amused. "It's a tiger shark, idiot."

Connor makes a mental note never to turn his back on Roland.

* * *

Sharks, Connor once read, have a deadly form of claustrophobia. It's not so much a fear of enclosed spaces as it is an inability to exist in them. No one knows why. Some say it's the metal in aquariums that throws their equilibrium off. But whatever it is, big sharks don't last long in captivity.

After a day in Sonia's basement, Connor knows how they feel. Risa has the baby to keep her occupied. It requires a huge amount of attention, and although she gripes about the responsibility, Connor can tell she's thankful simply to have something to help pass the hours. There's a back room to the basement, and Roland insists that Risa have it for herself and the baby. He acts like he's doing it to be

kind, but it's obvious that he's doing it because he can't stand the baby's crying.

Mai reads. There's a whole collection of dusty old books in the corner, and Mai always has one in her hand. Roland, having surrendered the back room to Risa, pulls out a shelving unit and sets up his own private residence behind it. He occupies the space like he's had experience with being in a cell. When he's not sitting in his little cell, he's reorganizing the food in the basement into rations. "I take care of the food," he announces. "Now that there's five of us, I'll redivide the rations, and decide who gets what and when."

"I can decide what I want and when for myself," Connor tells him.

"Not gonna work that way," Roland says. "I had things under control before you got here. It's gonna stay that way." Then he hands Connor a can of Spam. Connor looks at it in disgust. "You want better," Roland says, "then you get with the program."

Connor tries to weigh the wisdom of getting into a fight over this—but wisdom rarely arrives when Connor is ticked off. It's Hayden who defuses the situation before it can escalate. Hayden grabs the can from Connor and pulls open the top.

"You snooze, you lose," he says, and begins eating the Spam casually with his fingers. "Never had Spam till I came here—now I love it." Then he grins. "God help me, I'm turning into trailer trash."

Roland glares at Connor and Connor glares back. Then he says what he always says at moments like this.

"Nice socks."

Although Roland doesn't look down right away, it derails him just enough for him to back off. He doesn't check to see if his socks match until he thinks Connor isn't looking. And the moment he does, Connor snickers. Small victories are better than none.

Hayden is a bit of a riddle. Connor's not sure whether he's actually amused by everything that goes on around him or if it's all just an act—a way of defending himself against a situation too painful to allow himself to feel. Usually Connor disliked rich, affected kids like Hayden, but there's something about Hayden that simply makes it impossible not to like him.

Connor sits next to Hayden, who glances to make sure that Roland has gone behind his shelving unit.

"I like the 'nice socks' maneuver," says Hayden. "Mind if I use that sometime?"

"Be my guest."

Hayden pulls off a piece of Spam and offers it to Connor. Although it's the last thing Connor wants right now, he takes it, because he knows it's not about the meat—just as he knows Hayden didn't take it because he wanted it.

The chunk of processed ham passes from Hayden to Connor, and something between them relaxes. An understanding is reached. *I'm on your side,* that piece of Spam says. *I've got your back.*

"Did you mean to have the baby?" Hayden asks.

Connor considers how he might answer. He figures the truth is the best way to begin even a tentative friendship. "It's not mine."

Hayden nods. "It's cool that you're hanging with her even though the kid's not yours."

"It's not hers, either."

Hayden smirks. He doesn't ask how the baby came into their possession, because apparently the version he's come up with in his mind is far more entertaining than anything Connor can offer. "Don't tell Roland," he says. "The only reason he's being so nice to the two of you is because he believes in the sanctity of the nuclear family." Connor can't tell whether Hayden's being serious or sarcastic. He suspects he'll never figure that out.

Hayden chows down the last of the Spam, looks into the empty can, and sighs. "My life as a Morlock," he says.

"Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"Light-sensitive underground frogmen, often portrayed in bad green-rubber costumes. Sadly, this is what we've become. Except for the green-rubber costume part."

Connor glances at the food shelves. When he listens closely, he can hear the tinny beat of music coming from the antique MP3 player Roland must have stolen from upstairs when he first arrived.

"How long have you known Roland?"

"Three days longer than you," Hayden says. "Word to the unwise—which I suspect you are—Roland is fine as long as he thinks he's in charge. As long as you let him think that, we're all one big, happy family."

"What if I don't want him to think that?"

Hayden tosses his can of Spam into the trash a few feet away. "The thing about Morlocks is that they're known to be cannibals."

* * *

Connor can't sleep that first night. Between the discomfort of the basement and his distrust of Roland, all he can do is doze for moments at a time. He won't sleep in the side room with Risa because the space is small, and he and Risa would have to sleep right up against each other. He tells himself the real reason is that he's afraid of rolling over on the baby during the night. Mai and Hayden are also awake. It looks like Mai's trying to sleep, but her eyes are open and her mind is somewhere else.

Hayden has lit a candle he found in the debris, making the basement smell like cinnamon over mildew. Hayden passes his hand back and forth over the flame. He doesn't move slowly enough to burn himself, but he does move slowly enough to feel the heat. Hayden notices Connor watching him. "It's funny how a flame can only burn your hand if you move too slow," Hayden says. "You can tease it all you want and it never gets you, if you're quick enough."

"Are you a pyro?" Connor asks.

"You're confusing boredom with obsession."

Connor can sense, however, that there's more to it.

"I've been thinking about kids that get unwound," says Hayden.

"Why would you want to do that?" asks Connor.

"Because," says Mai from across the room, "he's a freak."

"I'm not the one wearing a dog collar."

Mai flips Hayden the finger, which he ignores. "I've been thinking about how harvest camps are like black holes. Nobody knows what goes on inside."

"Everybody knows what goes on," says Connor.

"No," says Hayden. "Everybody knows the result, but nobody knows how unwinding works. I want to know how it happens. Does it happen right away, or do they keep you waiting? Do they treat you kindly, or coldly?"

"Well," Mai sneers, "maybe if you're lucky, you'll get to find out firsthand."

"You know what," says Connor. "You think too much."

"Well, somebody has to make up for the collective lack of brainpower down here."

Now Connor finally begins to get it. Even though Hayden has put the candle down, all this talk of unwinding is just like passing his hand across the flame. He likes to linger at the edge of dangerous places. Dangerous thoughts. Connor thinks about his own favorite edge, behind the freeway road sign. In a way, they're both alike.

"Fine," Connor tells him. "Think about stuff until your head explodes. But the only thing I want to think about is surviving to eighteen."

"I find your shallowness both refreshing and disappointing at the same time. Do you think that means I need therapy?"

"No, I think your parents deciding to unwind you just to spite each other means you need therapy."

"Good point. You have a lot of insight for a Morlock." Then Hayden gets quiet for a moment. The smirk on his face fades. "If I actually get unwound, I think it will bring my parents back together."

Connor doesn't have the heart to burst his fantasy, but Mai does. "Naah. If you get unwound, they'll just blame each other for it, and hate each other even more."

"Maybe," says Hayden. "Or maybe they'll finally see the light, and it will be Humphrey Dunfee all over again."

"Who?" says Mai.

They both turn toward her. Hayden cracks a wide smile. "You mean you've never heard of Humphrey Dunfee?"

Mai looks around suspiciously. "Should I have?"

The smile never leaves Hayden's face. "Mai, I'm truly amazed that you don't know this. It's *your* kind of story." He reaches for the candle

and pushes it out so that it sits between the three of them. "It's not a campfire," he says, "but it will have to do." Hayden looks into the flame for a moment, then slowly, eerily turns his eyes toward Mai.

"Years ago there was this kid. His name wasn't really Humphrey—it was probably Hal or Harry or something like that—but Humphrey kind of fits, considering. Anyway, one day his parents sign the order to have him unwound."

"Why?" asks Mai.

"Why do any parents sign the order? They just did, and the Juvey-cops came for him bright and early one morning. They snatch him, ship him off, and it's over for him.—He's unwound without a hitch."

"So that's it?" asks Mai.

"No . . . because there *is* a hitch," says Connor, picking up where Hayden left off. "See, the Dunfees, they're not what you would call stable people. They were a little bit nuts to begin with, but after their kid is unwound, they lose it completely."

Now Mai's tough-girl exterior is all but gone. She truly is like a little kid listening wide-eyed to a campfire story. "What did they do?"

"They decided they didn't want Humphrey unwound after all," says Hayden.

"Wait a second," says Mai. "You said they already unwound him."

Hayden's eyes look maniacal in the candlelight. "They did."

Mai shudders.

"Here's the thing," says Hayden. "Like I said, everything about harvest camp is secret—even the records of who receives what, once the unwinding is done."

"Yeah, so?"

"So the Dunfees found the records. The father, I think, worked for the government, so he was able to hack into the parts department."

"The what?"

Hayden sighs. "The National Unwind Database."

"Oh."

"And he gets a printout of every single person who received a piece of Humphrey. Then the Dunfees go traveling around the world to find

them . . . so they can kill them, take back the parts, and bit by bit make Humphrey whole. . . .”

“No way.”

“That’s why people call him Humphrey,” Connor adds. “’Cause ‘all the king’s horses and all the king’s men . . . couldn’t put Humphrey together again.’”

The thought hangs heavy in the air, until Hayden, leaning forward over the candle, suddenly throws his hands out toward Mai and shouts, “Boo!”

They all flinch in spite of themselves—Mai most of all.

Connor has to laugh. “Did you see that? She practically jumped out of her skin!”

“Better not do that, Mai,” says Hayden. “Jump out of your skin, and they’ll give it to someone else before you can get it back.”

“You can both just take a flying leap.” Mai tries to punch Hayden, but he easily evades her. That’s when Roland appears from behind his bookshelves.

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” says Hayden. “Just telling ghost stories.”

Roland looks at the three of them, clearly irritated, and distrustful of any situation not involving him. “Yeah, well, get to bed. It’s late.”

Roland lumbers back to his corner, but Connor’s sure he’s monitoring the conversation now, probably paranoid that they’re plotting against him.

“That Humphrey Dunfee thing,” says Mai. “It’s just a story, right?”

Connor keeps his opinion to himself, but Hayden says, “I knew a kid who used to tell people he had Humphrey’s liver. Then one day he disappeared and was never seen again. People said he just got unwound, but then again . . . maybe the Dunfees got him.” Then Hayden blows out the candle, leaving them in darkness.

* * *

On Connor and Risa’s third day there, Sonia calls each of them upstairs—but one at a time, in the order they’d arrived.

"First the thieving ox," she says, pointing down the stairs at Roland. Apparently she knows about the stolen MP3 player.

"What do you suppose the Dragon Lady wants?" Hayden asks, after the trapdoor is closed.

"To drink your blood," says Mai. "Beat you with her cane for a while. Stuff like that."

"I wish you'd stop calling her the Dragon Lady," Risa says. "She's saving your ass—the least you could do is show some respect." She turns toward Connor. "You wanna take Didi? My arms are getting tired." Connor takes the baby, cradling it a bit more skillfully than he had before. Mai looks at him with mild interest. He wonders if Hayden told her that they're not really the baby's parents.

Roland comes back from his appointment with Sonia half an hour later, and says nothing about it. Neither does Mai when she comes back. Hayden takes the longest, and when he returns, he's closemouthed too—which is strange for him. It's unsettling.

Connor goes next. It's night outside when he goes upstairs. He has no idea what time of night. Sonia sits with him in her little back room, putting him in an uncomfortable chair that wobbles whenever he moves.

"You'll be leaving here tomorrow," she tells him.

"Going where?"

She ignores the question and reaches into the drawer of an old rolltop desk. "I'm hoping you're at least semiliterate."

"Why? What do you want me to read?"

"You don't have to read anything." Then she pulls out several sheets of blank paper. "I want you to write."

"What, my last will and testament? Is that it?"

"A will implies you have something to pass on—which you don't. What I want you to do is write a letter." She hands him the paper, a pen, and an envelope. "Write a letter to someone you love. Make it as long as you want, or as short as you want; I don't care. But fill it with everything you wished you could say, but never had the chance. Do you understand?"

"What if I don't love anybody?"

She purses her lips and shakes her head slowly. "You Unwinds are all the same. You think that because no one loves you, then you can't love anyone. All right, then, if there's no one you love, then pick someone who needs to hear what you have to say. Say everything that's in your heart—don't hold back. And when you're done, put it in the envelope and seal it. I'm not going to read it, so don't worry about that."

"What's the point? Are you going to mail it?"

"Just do it and stop asking questions." Then she takes a little ceramic dinner bell, and places it on the rolltop desk, next to the pen and paper. "Take all the time you need, and when you're done, ring the bell."

Then she leaves him alone.

It's an odd request, and Connor actually finds himself a bit frightened by it. There are places inside he simply doesn't want to go. He thinks he might write to Ariana. That would be easiest. He had cared about her. She was closer to him than any other girl had ever been. Every girl except Risa—but then, Risa doesn't really count. What he and Risa have isn't a relationship; it's just two people clinging to the same ledge hoping not to fall. After about three lines of his letter, Connor crumples the page. Writing to Ariana feels pointless. No matter how much he's resisted, he knows who he needs to address this letter to.

He presses his pen to a fresh page and writes, *Dear Mom and Dad. . . .*

It's five minutes before he can come up with another line, but once he does, the words start flowing—and in strange directions, too. At first it's angry, as he knew it would be. How could you? Why did you? What kind of people could do this to their kid? Yet by the third page it mellows. It becomes about all the good things that happened in their lives together. At first he does it to hurt them, and to remind them exactly what they've thrown away when they signed the order to unwind him. But then it becomes all about remembering—or more to the point, getting *them* to remember, so that when he's gone . . . *if* he's gone, there will be a record of all the things he felt were worth keeping

alive. When he started, he knew how the letter would end. *I hate you for what you've done. And I'll never forgive you.* But when he finally reaches the tenth page, he finds himself writing, *I love you. Your one-time son, Connor.*

Even before he signs his name, he feels the tears welling up inside. They don't seem to come from his eyes but from deep in his gut. It's a heaving so powerful it hurts his stomach and his lungs. His eyes flood, and the pain inside is so great, he's certain it will kill him right here, right now. But he doesn't die, and in time the storm inside him passes, leaving him weak in every joint and muscle of his body. He feels like he needs Sonia's cane just to walk again.

His tears have soaked into the pages, warping little craters in the paper but not smudging the ink. He folds the pages and slips them into the envelope, then seals and addresses it. He takes a few more minutes to make sure the storm won't come back. Then he rings the little bell.

Sonia steps in moments later. She must have been waiting all this time just on the other side of that curtain. Connor knows she must have heard him bawling, but she doesn't say a thing. She looks at his letter, hefts it in her hand to feel its weight, and raises her eyebrows, impressed. "Had a lot to say, did you?"

Connor only shrugs. She puts the envelope facedown on the table again. "Now I want you to put a date on the back. Write down the date of your eighteenth birthday."

Connor doesn't question her anymore. He does as she asks. When he's done, she takes the envelope from him. "I'm going to hold this letter for you," she tells him. "If you survive to eighteen, you must promise that you'll come back here to get it. Will you make me that promise?"

Connor nods. "I promise."

She shakes the letter at him to help make her point. "I will keep this until a year after your eighteenth birthday. If you don't come back, I'll assume you didn't make it. That you were unwound. In that case I'll send the letter myself."

Then she hands the letter back to him, stands, and goes over to the old trunk that had covered the trapdoor. She opens the latch and, although it must be heavy, heaves open the lid to reveal envelopes—hundreds of them, filling the trunk almost up to the top.

"Leave it here," she says. "It will be safe. If I die before you come back, Hannah has promised to take care of the trunk."

Connor thinks of all the kids Sonia must have helped to have this many letters in her trunk, and he feels another wave of emotion taking hold of his gut. It doesn't quite bring him to tears, but it makes him feel all soft inside. Soft enough to say, "You've done something wonderful here."

Sonia waves her hand, swatting the thought away. "You think this makes me a saint? Let me tell you, I've had a considerably long life, and I've done some pretty awful things, too."

"Well, I don't care. No matter how many times you smack me with that cane, I think you're decent."

"Maybe, maybe not. One thing you learn when you've lived as long as I have—people aren't all good, and people aren't all bad. We move in and out of darkness and light all of our lives. Right now, I'm pleased to be in the light."

On his way downstairs, she makes sure to smack him on the butt with her cane hard enough to sting, but it only makes him laugh.

He doesn't tell Risa what's in store for her. Somehow telling her would be stealing something from her. Let this be between her, Sonia, the pen, and the page, as it had been for him.

She leaves the baby with him as she goes up to face the old woman. It's asleep, and right now, in this place and at this moment, there's something so comforting about holding it in his arms, he's thankful he saved it. And he thinks that if his soul had a form, this is what it would be. A baby sleeping in his arms.

OceanofPDF.com

20 · Risa

The next time Sonia opens the trapdoor, Risa knows things are changing again. The time has come to leave the safety of Sonia's basement.

Risa's the first in line when Sonia calls them to come up. Roland would have been, but Connor threw an arm out like a turnstile to let Risa get to the stairs first.

With the sleeping baby crooked in her right arm, and her left hand on the rusty steel banister, Risa climbs the jagged stone steps. Risa assumes she'll be climbing into daylight, but it's night. The lights are out in the shop—just a few night-lights are on, carefully positioned so the kids can avoid the minefield of random antiques around them.

Sonia leads them to a back door that opens into an alley. There's a truck waiting for them there. It's a small delivery truck. On its side is a picture of an ice cream cone.

Sonia hadn't lied. It *is* the ice cream man.

The driver stands beside the open back door of the truck. He's a scruffy guy who looks like he'd more likely be delivering illegal drugs than kids. Roland, Hayden, and Mai head for the truck, but Sonia stops Risa and Connor.

"Not yet, you two."

Then Risa notices a figure standing in the shadows. Risa's neck hairs begin to bristle defensively, but when the figure steps forward, she realizes who it is. It's Hannah, the teacher who saved them at the high school.

"Honey, the baby can't go where you're going," Hannah says.

Reflexively, Risa holds the baby closer to her. She doesn't even know why. All she's wanted to do since getting stuck with the thing is to get rid of it.

"It's all right," says Hannah. "I've talked it over with my husband. We'll just say we were storked. It will be fine."

Risa looks in Hannah's eyes. She can't see all that well in the dim light, but she knows the woman means what she says.

Connor, however, steps between them. "Do you *want* this baby?"

"She's willing to take it," says Risa. "That's enough."

"But does she want it?"

"Did *you* want it?"

That seems to give Connor pause for thought. Risa knows he didn't want it, but he had been willing to take it when the alternative was a miserable life with a miserable family. Just as Hannah is willing to save it from an uncertain future right now. Finally Connor says, "It's not an *it*. It's a *she*." Then he heads off toward the truck.

"We'll give her a good home," Hannah says. She takes a step closer, and Risa transfers the baby to her.

The moment the baby is out of her arms Risa feels a tremendous sense of relief, but also an indefinable sense of emptiness. It's a feeling not quite intense enough to leave her in tears, but strong enough to leave her with a phantom sort of aching, the type of thing an amputee must feel after losing a limb. That is, before a new one is grafted on.

"You take care, now," says Sonia, giving Risa an awkward hug. "It's a long journey, but I know you can make it."

"Journey to where?"

Sonia doesn't answer.

"Hey," says the driver, "I don't got all night."

Risa says good-bye to Sonia, nods to Hannah, and turns to join Connor, who's waiting for her at the back of the truck. As Risa leaves, the baby starts to cry, but she doesn't look back.

She's surprised to find about a dozen other kids in the truck, all distrustful and scared. Roland's still the biggest, and he solidifies his position by making another kid move, even though there's plenty of other places to sit.

The delivery truck is a hard, cold, metal box. It once had a refrigeration unit to keep the ice cream cold, but that's gone along with the ice cream. Still, it's freezing in there, and it smells of spoiled dairy. The driver closes and locks the back doors, sealing out the sound of the baby, who Risa can still hear crying. Even after the door

is closed, she thinks she can still hear it, although it's probably just her imagination.

The ice cream truck bounces along the uneven streets. The way the truck sways, their backs are constantly smacked against the wall behind them.

Risa closes her eyes. It makes her furious that she actually misses the baby. It was thrust upon her at the worst possible moment in her life—why should she have any regret about being rid of it? She thinks about the days before the Heartland War, when unwanted babies could just be unwanted pregnancies, quickly made to go away. Did the women who made that other choice feel the way she felt now? Relieved and freed from an unwelcome and often unfair responsibility . . . yet vaguely regretful?

In her days at the state home, when she was assigned to take care of the infants, she would often ponder such things. The infant wing had been massive and overflowing with identical cribs, each containing a baby that nobody had wanted, wards of a state that could barely feed them, much less nurture them.

"You can't change laws without first changing human nature," one of the nurses often said as she looked out over the crowd of crying infants. Her name was Greta. Whenever she said something like that, there was always another nurse within earshot who was far more accepting of the system and would counter with, "You can't change human nature without first changing the law." Nurse Greta wouldn't argue; she'd just grunt and walk away.

Which was worse, Risa often wondered—to have tens of thousands of babies that no one wanted, or to silently make them go away before they were even born? On different days Risa had different answers.

Nurse Greta was old enough to remember the days before the war, but she rarely spoke of them. All her attention was given to her job, which was a formidable one, since there was only one nurse for every fifty babies. "In a place like this you have to practice triage," she told Risa, referring to how, in an emergency, a nurse had to choose which patients would get medical attention. "Love the ones you can," Nurse Greta told her. "Pray for the rest." Risa took the advice to heart, and

selected a handful of favorites to give extra attention. These were the ones Risa named herself, instead of letting the randomizing computer name them. Risa liked to think she had been named by a human being instead of by a computer. After all, her name wasn't all that common. "It's short for *sonrisa*," a Hispanic kid once told her. "That's Spanish for 'smile.'" Risa didn't know if she had any Hispanic blood in her, but she liked to think she did. It connected her to her name.

"What are you thinking about?" Connor asks, tearing her out of her thoughts and bringing her back to the uneasy reality around them.

"None of your business."

Connor doesn't look at her—he seems to be focusing on a big rust spot on the wall, thinking. "You okay about the baby?" he asks.

"Of course." Her tone is intentionally indignant, as if the question itself offended her.

"Hannah will give her a good home," Connor says. "Better than us, that's for sure, and better than that beady-eyed cow who got storked." He hesitates for a moment, then says, "Taking that baby was a massive screwup, I know—but it ended okay for us, right? And it definitely ended better for the baby."

"Don't screw up like that again," is all Risa says.

Roland, sitting toward the front, turns to the driver and asks, "Where are we going?"

"You're asking the wrong guy," the driver answers. "They give me an address. I go there, I look the other way, and I get paid."

"This is how it works," says another kid who had already been in the truck when it arrived at Sonia's. "We get shuffled around. One safe house for a few days, then another, and then another. Each one is a little bit closer to where we're going."

"You gonna tell us where that is?" asks Roland.

The kid looks around, hoping someone else might answer for him, but no one comes to his aid. So he says, "Well, it's only what I hear, but they say we end up in a place called . . . 'the graveyard.'"

No response from the kids, just the rattling of the truck.

The graveyard. The thought of it makes Risa even colder. Even though she's curled up knees to chest, arms wrapped tight around her

like a straitjacket, she's still freezing. Connor must hear the chattering of her teeth, because he puts his arm around her.

"I'm cold too," he says. "Body heat, right?"

And although she has an urge to push him away, she finds herself leaning into him until she can feel his heartbeat in her ears.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Three

Transit

2003: UKRAINIAN MATERNITY HOSPITAL #6

. . . The BBC has spoken to mothers from the city of Kharkiv who say they gave birth to healthy babies, only to have them taken by maternity staff. In 2003 the authorities agreed to exhume around 30 bodies from a cemetery used by maternity hospital number 6. One campaigner was allowed into the autopsy to gather video evidence. She has given that footage to the BBC and Council of Europe.

In its report, the Council describes a general culture of trafficking of children snatched at birth, and a wall of silence from hospital staff upward over their fate. The pictures show organs, including brains, have been stripped—and some bodies dismembered. A senior British forensic pathologist says he is very concerned to see bodies in pieces—as that is not standard post-mortem practice. It could possibly be a result of harvesting stem cells from bone marrow.

Hospital number 6 denies the allegations.

Story by Matthew Hill, BBC Health Correspondent
From BBC NEWS: at BBC.com
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/6171083.stm
Published: 2006/12/12 09:34:50 GMT © BBC MMVI

OceanofPDF.com

21 · Lev

"Ain't no one gonna tell you what's in your heart," he tells Lev. "You gotta find that out for yourself."

Lev and his new travel companion walk along train tracks, surrounded by thick, brushy terrain.

"You got it in your heart to run from unwinding, ain't no one can tell you it's the wrong thing to do, even if it *is* against the law. The good Lord wouldn't have put it in your heart if it wasn't right. You listenin', Fry? 'Cause this here is wisdom. Wisdom you can take to the grave, then dig it up again when you need some solace. Solace—that means 'comfort.'"

"I know what solace means," says Lev, peeved by the mention of "the good Lord," who hasn't done much for Lev lately, except confuse things.

The kid is fifteen, and his name is Cyrus Finch—although he doesn't go by that name. "No one calls me Cyrus," he had told Lev shortly after they met. "I go by CyFi."

And, since CyFi is partial to nicknames, he calls Lev "Fry"—short for small-fry. Since it has the same number of letters as "Lev," he says it's appropriate. Lev doesn't want to burst his bubble by pointing out that his full name is Levi.

CyFi enjoys hearing himself talk.

"I make my own roads in life," he tells Lev. "That's how come we're traveling the rails instead of some dumb old country road."

CyFi is umber. "They used to call us black—can you imagine? Then there was this artist dude—mixed-race himself, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. He got famous, though, for painting people of African ancestry in the Deep South. The color he used most was umber. People liked that a whole lot better, so it stuck. Bet you didn't know where the word came from, did you, Fry? Following right along, they started calling so-called white people "sienna," after another paint

color. Better words. Didn't have no value judgment to them. Of course, it's not like racism is gone completely, but as my dads like to say, the veneer of civilization got itself a second coat. You like that, Fry? 'The veneer of civilization?'" He slowly sweeps his hand in the air as he says it, like he's feeling the fine finish of a table. "My dads are always saying stuff like that."

CyFi's a runaway, although he claims not to be. "I ain't no runaway —I'm a run-to," he had told Lev when they first met, although he won't tell Lev where he's running to. When Lev asked, CyFi shook his head and said, "Information shall be given on a need-to-know basis."

Well, he can keep his secret, because Lev doesn't care where he's going. The simple fact that he has a destination is enough for Lev. It's more than Lev has. Destination implies a future. If this umber-skinned boy can lend Lev that much, it's worth it to travel with him.

They had met at a mall. Hunger had driven Lev there. He had hidden in dark lonely places for almost two days after he lost Connor and Risa. With no experience being a street rat, he went hungry—but eventually, hunger turns anyone into a master of survival.

The mall was a mecca for a newborn street rat. The food court was full of amazingly wasteful people. The trick, Lev discovered, was to find people who bought more food than they could possibly eat, and then wait until they were done. About half the time, they just left it on the table. Those were the ones Lev went after—because he might have been hungry enough to eat table scraps, but he was still too proud to rifle through the trash. While Lev was finishing off some cheerleader's pizza, he heard a voice in his ear.

"You ain't gotta be eatin' other folks' garbage, foo'!"

Lev froze, certain it was a security guard ready to haul him away, but it was only this tall umber kid with a funny grin, wearing attitude like it was a cologne. "Let me show you how it's done." Then he went to a pretty girl who was working at the Wicked Wok Chinese food concession, flirted with her for a few minutes, then left with nothing. No food, no drink, nothing.

"I think I'll stick to leftovers," Lev had told him.

"Patience, my man. See, it's gettin' on toward closing time. All these places, by law gotta get rid of all the food they made today. They can't keep it and reuse it tomorrow. So where do you think that food goes? I'll tell you where it goes. It goes home with the last shift. But the people who work these places ain't gonna eat that stuff on accounta they are sick to death of it. See that girl I was talkin' to? She likes me. I told her I worked at Shirt Bonanza, downstairs, and could get her some overstock maybe."

"*Do* you work there?"

"No! Are you even listenin' to me? So any-who, right before closing I'm gonna get myself over to the Wicked Wok again. I'll give her a smile, and I'll be all, like, 'Hey, whatcha gonna do with all that leftover food?' And she'll be all, like, 'Whatcha got in mind?' And five minutes later I'm walking away in orange chicken heaven, with enough to feed an army."

And sure enough, it happened exactly like he said it would. Lev was amazed.

"Stick with me," CyFi had said, putting his fist in the air, "and as God is my witness, you will never go hungry again." Then he added, "That's from *Gone with the Wind*."

"I know," said Lev. Which, in fact, he didn't.

Lev had agreed to go with him because he knew the two filled a need in each other. CyFi was like a preacher with no flock. He couldn't exist without an audience, and Lev needed someone who could fill his head with ideas, to replace the lifetime of ideas that had been taken from him.

A day later, Lev's shoes are worn and his muscles are sore. The memory of Risa and Connor is still a fresh wound, and it doesn't want to heal. Chances are, they were caught. Chances are, they've been unwound. All because of him. Does that make him an accomplice to murder?

How could it, when Unwinds aren't really dead?

He doesn't know whose voice is in his head anymore. His father's? Pastor Dan's? It just makes him angry. He'd rather hear CyFi's voice outside of his head than whatever voices were inside.

The terrain around them hasn't changed much since they left town. Eye-high shrubs and a smattering of trees. Some of the growth is evergreen, some of it yellow, turning brown. Weeds grow up between the train tracks, but not too tall.

"Any weed dumb enough to grow tall ain't got no chance. It gets decapitated by the next train that comes through. Decapitated—that means 'head cut off.'"

"I know what 'decapitated' means—and you can stop talking that way; all double negatives and stuff."

CyFi stops right there in the middle of the railroad tracks and stares at Lev like he's trying to melt him with his eyes.

"You got a problem with the way I talk? You got a problem with an Old World Umber patois?"

"I do when it's fake."

"Whachoo talkin' about, foo'!"

"It's obvious. I'll bet people never even said things like 'foo,' except on dumb prewar TV shows and stuff. You're speaking wrong on purpose."

"Wrong? What makes it wrong? It's classic, just like those TV shows —and I ain't appreciating you disrespecting my patois. Patois means —"

"I know what it means," Lev says even though he isn't entirely sure. "I ain't stupid!"

CyFi puts up an accusing finger like a lawyer. "A-HA! You said 'ain't.' Now who's talking wrong?"

"That doesn't count! I said it because it's all I hear from you! After a while I can't help but sound like you!"

At that, CyFi grins. "Yeah," he says. "Ain't that the truth. Old World Umber is contagious. It's *dominant*. And talkin' the talk don't make a person dumb. I'll have you know, I got the highest readin' and writin' score in my school, Fry. But I gotta respect my ancestors an' all they went through so I could be here. Sure, I can talk like you, but I *choose* not to. It's like art, you know? Picasso had to prove to the world he can paint the right way, before he goes putting both eyes on one side of a face, and noses stickin' outta kneecaps and stuff. See, if you paint

wrong because that's the best you can do, you just a chump. But you do it because you want to? Then you're an artist." He smiles at Lev. "That's a bit of CyFi wisdom right there, Fry. You can take *that* to the grave, and dig it up when you need it!"

CyFi turns and spits out a piece of gum that hits a train rail and sticks there, then he shoves another piece in his mouth. "Anyway, my dads got no problem with it—and they're lily-sienna like you."

"They?" Cy had said "dads" before, but Lev had figured it was just some more Old Umber slang.

"Yeah," says CyFi, with a shrug. "I got two. Ain't no thang."

Lev tries his best to process this. Of course, he's heard of male parenting—or "yin families," as they're currently called—but in the sheltered structure of his life, such things always belonged to an alternate universe.

CyFi, however, doesn't even catch Lev's surprise. He's still on his brag jag.

"Yeah, I got myself an IQ of 155. Did you know that, Fry? A'course not—how would you know?" Then he hesitates. "It went down a few points, though, on account the accident. I was on my bike and got hit by some damfoo' in a Mercedes." He points to a scar on the side of his head. "What a mess. Splattered—y'know? I was nearly roadkill. It turned my right temporal lobe into Jell-O." He shivers as he thinks about it, then shrugs. "But brain damage ain't a problem like it used to be. They just replace the brain tissue and you're good as new. My dads even paid off the surgeon so I'd get an entire temporal lobe from an Unwind—no offense—rather than getting a buncha brain bits, like people are *supposed* to get."

Lev knows about that. His sister Cara has epilepsy, so they replaced a small part of her brain with a hundred tiny brain bits. It took care of the problem, and she didn't seem any worse for it. It had never occurred to Lev where those tiny pieces of brain tissue might have come from.

"See, brain bits work okay, but they don't work great," CyFi explains. "It's like puttin' spackle over a hole in a wall. No matter how well you do it, that wall ain't never gonna be as good. So my dads

made sure I got an entire temporal lobe from a single donor. But that kid wasn't as smart as me. He wasn't no dummy, but he didn't have the 155. The last brain scan put me at 130. That's in the top 5 percent of the population, and still considered genius. Just not with a capital *G*. What's your IQ?" he asks Lev. "Are you a dim bulb or high-wattage?"

Lev sighs. "I don't know. My parents don't believe in intelligence scans. It's kind of a religious thing. Everyone's equal in God's eyes and all that."

"Oh—you come from one of *those* families." CyFi takes a good look at him. "So if they all high and mighty, why they unwinding you?"

Although Lev doesn't want to get into it, he figures CyFi is the only friend he's got. Might as well tell him the truth. "I'm a tithe."

CyFi looks at him with eyes all wide, like Lev just told him he was God himself.

"Damn! So you all holy and stuff?"

"Not anymore."

CyFi nods and purses his lips, saying nothing for a while. They walk along the tracks. The railroad ties change from wood to stone, and the gravel on the side of the tracks now seems better maintained.

"We just crossed the state line," CyFi says.

Lev would ask him which state they've crossed into, but he doesn't want to sound stupid.

* * *

Any spot where multiple tracks merge or diverge, there's a little two-story shack standing there like a displaced lighthouse. A railroad switch house. There are plenty of them along this stretch of the line, and these are the places Lev and CyFi find shelter each night.

"Aren't you afraid someone from the railroads'll find us here?" Lev asks as they approach one of the sorry-looking structures.

"Nah—they ain't used anymore," CyFi tells him. "The whole system's automated—been that way for years, but it costs too much to tear all those switch houses down. Guess they figure nature will eventually tear them down for free."

The switch house is padlocked, but a padlock is only as strong as the door it's on—and this door had been routed by termites. A single kick rips the padlock hasp from the wood, and the door flies inward to a shower of dust and dead spiders.

Upstairs is an eight-by-eight room, windows on all four sides. It's freezing. CyFi has an expensive-looking winter coat that keeps him warm at night. Lev only has a puffy fiberfill jacket that he stole from a chair at the mall the other day.

CyFi had turned his nose up when he saw Lev take that jacket, just before they left the mall. "Stealing's for lowlifes," Cy had said. "If you got class, you don't steal what you need, you get other people to give it to you of their own free will—just like I did back at that Chinese place. It's all about being smart, and being smooth. You'll learn."

Lev's stolen jacket is white, and he hates it. All his life he'd worn white—a pristine absence of color that defined him—but now there was no comfort in wearing it.

They eat well that night—thanks to Lev, who finally had his own survivalist brainstorm. It involved small animals killed by passing trains.

"I ain't eatin' no track-kill!" CyFi insisted when Lev had suggested it. "Those things coulda been rottin' out here for weeks, for all we know."

"No," Lev told him. "Here's what we do: We walk a few miles down the tracks, marking each dead critter with a stick. Then, when the next train comes through, we backtrack. Anything we find that's not marked is fresh." Granted, it was a fairly disgusting idea on the surface, but it was really no different from hunting—if your weapon were a diesel engine.

They build a small fire beside the switch house and dine on roast rabbit and armadillo—which doesn't taste as bad as Lev thought it would. In the end, meat is meat, and barbecue does for armadillo exactly what it does for steak.

"Smorgas-bash!!" CyFi decides to call this hunting method as they eat. "That's what I call creative problem solving. Maybe you're a genius after all, Fry."

It feels good to have Cy's approval.

"Hey, is today Thursday?" says Lev, just realizing. "I think it's Thanksgiving!"

"Well, Fry, we're alive. That's plenty to be thankful for."

* * *

That night, up in the small room of the switch house, CyFi asks the big question. "Why'd your parents tithe you, Fry?"

One of the good things about being with CyFi is that he talks about himself a lot. It keeps Lev from having to think about his own life. Except, of course, when Cy asks. Lev answers him with silence, pretending to be asleep—and if there's one thing he knows CyFi can't stand, it's silence, so he fills it himself.

"Were you a storked baby? Is that it? They didn't want you in the first place, and couldn't wait to get rid of you?"

Lev keeps his eyes closed and doesn't move.

"Well, *I* was storked," Cy says. "My dads got me on the doorstep the first day of summer. No big deal—they were ready to have a family anyway. In fact, they were so pleased, they finally made it official and got themselves mmarried."

Lev opens his eyes, curious enough to admit he's still awake. "But . . . after the Heartland War, didn't they make it illegal for men to get married?"

"They didn't get married, they got *mmarried*."

"What's the difference?"

CyFi looks at him like he's a moron. "The letter *m*. Anyway, in case you're wondering, I'm not like my dads—my compass points to girls, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah. Yeah, mine does too." What he doesn't tell CyFi is that the closest he's ever been to a date or even kissing a girl was the slow dancing at his tithing party.

The thought of the party brings a sudden and sharp jolt of anxiety that makes him want to scream, so he squeezes his eyes tight and forces that explosive feeling to go away. Everything from Lev's old life

is like that now—a ticking time bomb in his head. *Forget that life,* he tells himself. *You're not that boy anymore.*

"What are your parents like?" CyFi asks.

"I hate them," Lev says, surprised that he's said it. Surprised that he means it.

"That's not what I asked."

This time Cy isn't taking silence for an answer, so Lev tells him as best he can. "My parents," he begins, "do everything they're supposed to. They pay their taxes. They go to church. They vote the way their friends expect them to vote, and think what they're supposed to think, and they send us to schools that raise us to think exactly like they do."

"Doesn't sound too terrible to me."

"It wasn't," says Lev, his discomfort building. "But they loved God more than they loved me, and I hate them for it. So I guess that means I'm going to Hell."

"Hmm. Tell you what. When you get there, save a room for me, okay?"

"Why? What makes you think you're going there?"

"I don't, but just in case. Gotta plan your contingencies, right?"

* * *

Two days later they find themselves in the town of Scottsburg, Indiana. Well, at least Lev finally knows what state they're in. He wonders if maybe this is CyFi's destination, but Cy hasn't said anything either way. They've left the railroad tracks, and CyFi tells Lev they have to go south on county roads until they can find tracks heading in that direction.

Cy hasn't been acting right.

It began the night before. Something in his voice. Something in his eyes, too. At first Lev thought it was his imagination, but now in the pale light of the autumn day it's clear that CyFi isn't himself. He's lagging behind Lev instead of leading. His stride is all off—more like a shuffle than a strut. It makes Lev anxious in a way he hasn't been since before he met CyFi.

“Are you ever going to tell me where we’re going?” Lev asks, figuring that maybe they’re close, and maybe that’s why Cy’s acting weird.

CyFi hesitates, weighing the wisdom of saying anything. Finally he says, “We’re going to Joplin. That’s in southwest Missouri, so we’ve still got a long way to go.”

In the back of his mind, Lev registers that CyFi has completely dropped his Old Umber way of talking. Now he sounds like any other kid Lev might have known back home. But there’s also something dark and throaty about his voice now, too. Vaguely menacing, like the voice of a werewolf before it turns.

“What’s in Joplin?” Lev asks.

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

But Lev *is* beginning to worry—because when CyFi gets where he’s going, Lev will be alone again. This journey was easier when he didn’t know the destination.

As they walk, Lev can tell Cy’s mind is somewhere else. Maybe it’s in Joplin. What could be there? Maybe a girlfriend moved there? Maybe he had tracked down his birth mother. Lev has worked up a dozen reasons for CyFi to be on this trip, and there’s probably a dozen more he hasn’t even thought of.

There’s a main street in Scottsburg trying to be quaint but just looking tired. It’s late morning as they move through town. Restaurants are gearing up for the lunch crowd.

“So, are you gonna use your charms to get us a free meal, or is it my turn to try?” Lev asks. He turns to Cy, but he’s not there. A quick scan of the shops behind him and Lev sees a door swinging closed. It’s a Christmas store, its windows all done up in green and red decorations, plastic reindeer, and cotton snow. Lev can’t imagine Cy has gone in there, but when he peers in the window, there he is, looking around like a customer. With the weird way CyFi has been acting, Lev has no choice but to go in as well.

It’s warm in the store, and it smells of artificial pine. It’s the kind of scent they put on cardboard air fresheners. There are fully trimmed aluminum Christmas trees all around, displaying all sorts of holiday

decorations, each tree with a different theme. In another time and place, Lev would have loved wandering through a store like this.

A saleswoman eyes them suspiciously from behind the counter. Lev grabs Cy's shoulder. "C'mon, let's get out of here." But Cy shakes him off and goes over to a tree that's decorated all in glittering gold. He seems mesmerized by all the bulbs and tinsel. There's the slightest twitch right beneath his left eye.

"Cy," whispers Lev. "C'mon—we have to get to Joplin. Remember? Joplin."

But Cy's not moving. The saleswoman comes over. She wears a holiday sweater and a holiday smile. "Can I help you find something?"

"No," says Lev. "We were just leaving."

"A nutcracker," says Cy. "I'm looking for a nutcracker for my mom."

"Oh, they're on the back wall." The woman turns to look across the store, and the moment she does, Cy picks a dangling gold bauble from the glittering tree and slips it into his coat pocket.

Lev just stands there, stunned.

Cy doesn't even spare Lev a glance as he follows the woman to the back wall, where they discuss nutcrackers.

There's a panic brewing deep down in Lev now, slowly fighting its way to the surface. Cy and the woman chat for a few moments more, then Cy thanks her and comes back to the front of the store. "I've gotta get more money from home," he says in his Cy/not-Cy voice. "I think my mom will like the blue one."

You don't have a mom, Lev wants to say, but he doesn't because all that matters now is getting out of the shop.

"All right then," says the saleswoman. "You have a nice day!"

Cy leaves, and Lev makes sure he's right behind him, just in case Cy suddenly has a phantom urge to go back into the store and take something else.

Then, the moment the door closes behind them, CyFi takes off. He doesn't just run, he ejects, like he's trying to burst out of his own skin. He bolts down the block, then into the street. Then back again. Cars honk, a truck nearly mows him down. He darts in random directions

like a balloon losing air, and then he disappears into an alley far down the street.

This is not about a gold Christmas bulb. It can't be. It's a meltdown. It's a seizure, the nature of which Lev can't even begin to guess. *I should just let him go,* Lev thinks. *Let him go, then run in the opposite direction, and not look back.* Lev could survive on his own now. He's gotten street-smart enough. He could do it without CyFi.

But there was that look about Cy before he ran. Desperation. It was just like the look in Connor's face the moment he pulled Lev out of his father's comfortable sedan. Lev had turned on Connor. He will not turn on CyFi.

With a pace and stride far steadier than CyFi's, Lev crosses the street and makes his way down the alley.

"CyFi," he calls, loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to draw attention. "Cy!" He glances in Dumpsters and doorways. "Cyrus, where are you?" He comes to the end of the alley and looks left and right. No sign of him. Then, as he's about to lose hope, he hears, "Fry?"

He turns his head and listens again.

"Fry. Over here."

This time he can tell where it's coming from: a playground to his right. Green plastic and steel poles painted blue. There are no children playing—the only sign of life is the tip of CyFi's shoe poking out from behind the slide. Lev crosses through a hedge, steps down into the sand that surrounds the playground, and circles the apparatus until CyFi comes into view.

Lev almost wants to back away from what he sees.

Cy is curled, knees to chest, like a baby. The left side of his face is twitching, and his left hand quivers like gelatin. He grimaces as if he's in pain.

"What is it? What's wrong? Tell me. Maybe I can help you."

"Nothing," CyFi hisses. "I'll be all right."

But to Lev he looks like he's dying.

In his shaking left hand CyFi holds the ornament he stole. "I didn't steal this," he says.

"Cy . . ."

"I SAID, I DIDN'T STEAL THIS!" He smashes the heel of his right hand against the side of his head. "IT WASN'T ME!"

"Okay—whatever you say." Lev looks around to make sure they're unobserved.

Cy quiets down a bit. "Cyrus Finch doesn't steal. Never did, never will. It's not my style." He says it, even as he looks at the evidence right there in his hand. But in a second the evidence is gone. CyFi raises his right fist and smashes it into his left palm, shattering the bulb. Gold glass tinkles to the ground. Blood begins to ooze from his left palm and right knuckles.

"Cy, your hand . . ."

"Don't worry about that," he says. "I want you to do something for me, Fry. Do it before I change my mind."

Lev nods.

"See my coat over there? I want you to look in the pockets."

CyFi's heavy coat is a few yards away tossed over the seat of a swing. Lev goes to the swing set and picks up the coat. He reaches into an inside pocket and finds, of all things, a gold cigarette lighter. He pulls it out.

"Is that it, Cy? You want a cigarette?" If a cigarette would bring CyFi out of this, Lev would be the first to light it for him. There are things far more illegal than cigarettes, anyway.

"Check the other pockets."

Lev searches the other pockets for a pack of cigarettes, but there are none. Instead he finds a small treasure trove. Jeweled earrings, watches, a gold necklace, a diamond bracelet—things that shimmer and shine even in the dim daylight.

"Cy, what did you do . . . ?"

"I already told you, it wasn't me! Now go take all that stuff and get rid of it. Get rid of it and don't let me see where you put it." Then he covers his eyes like it's a game of hide-and-seek. "Go—before he changes my mind!"

Lev pulls everything out of the pocket and, cradling it in his arms, runs to the far end of the playground. He digs in the cold sand and

drops it all in, kicking sand back over it. When he's done, he smoothes it over with the side of his shoe and drops a scattering of leaves above it. He goes back to CyFi, who's sitting there just like Lev left him, hands over his face.

"It's done," Lev says. "You can look now." When Cy takes his hands away, there's blood all over his face from the cuts on his hands. Cy stares at his hands, then looks at Lev helplessly, like . . . well, like a kid who just got hurt in a playground. Lev half expects him to cry.

"You wait here," Lev says. "I'll go get some bandages." He knows he'll have to steal them. He wonders what Pastor Dan would say about all the things he's been stealing lately.

"Thank you, Fry," Cy says. "You did good, and I ain't gonna forget it." The Old Umber lilt is back in his voice. The twitching has stopped.

"Sure thing," says Lev, with a comforting smile, and he heads off to find a pharmacy.

What CyFi doesn't know is that Lev has kept a single diamond bracelet, which he now hides in the inside pocket of his not-so-white jacket.

* * *

Lev finds them a place to sleep that night. It's the best they've had yet: a motel room. Finding it wasn't all that hard to do—he scouted out a run-down motel without many cars out front. Then it was just a matter of finding an unlocked bathroom window in an unoccupied room. As long as they kept the curtains drawn and the lights off, no one would know they were there.

"My genius keeps rubbin' off on you," CyFi tells him. Cy's back to his old self, like the incident that morning never happened. Only it *did* happen, and they both know it.

Outside they hear a car door open. Lev and Cy prepare to bolt if a key turns in the motel room lock, but it's another door they hear opening, a few rooms away. Cy shakes out his tension, but Lev doesn't relax. Not yet.

"I want to know about today," Lev says. It's not a question. It's a request.

Cy is unconcerned. “Ancient history,” he says. “Leave the past in the past, and live for the moment. That’s wisdom you can take to the grave, and dig up when you need it!”

“What if I dig it up right now?” Lev takes a moment to let it sink in, then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the diamond bracelet. He holds it in front of him, making sure the streetlight spilling through a slit in the curtains catches the diamonds so they glisten.

“Where’d you get that?” CyFi’s voice has lost all the playfulness it had only a second ago.

“I kept it,” Lev says, calmly. “I thought it might come in handy.”

“I told you to get rid of it.”

“It wasn’t yours to get rid of. After all, you said it yourself—*you* didn’t steal it.” Lev twists the bracelet so a diamond refracts a sparkle of light right into CyFi’s eye. Without the room lights on Lev can’t see much, but he can swear he sees CyFi’s cheek starting to twitch.

Cy stands up, looming over Lev. Lev stands as well, a full head shorter than CyFi. “You take that outta my face,” says CyFi, “or I swear I’m gonna pound you into pork rinds.”

Lev thinks he might actually do it, too. CyFi clenches his fists; with the bandages he looks like a boxer, hands wrapped before putting on the gloves. Still, Lev doesn’t back down. He just dangles the bracelet. It sends little twinkling lights flitting around the room like a lazy disco ball. “I’ll put it away if you tell me why this bracelet and all those other things wound up in your pockets.”

“Put it away first, then I’ll tell you.”

“Fair enough.” Lev slips the bracelet back into his pocket and waits, but CyFi isn’t talking. So Lev gives him a little prompt. “What’s his name?” Lev asks. “Or is it a she?”

CyFi’s shoulders slump in defeat. He crumples into a chair. Lev can’t see his face at all now in the darkness, so Lev listens closely to his voice. As long as it still sounds like Cy’s voice, he knows that Cy’s okay. Lev sits himself on the edge of the bed a few feet away from Cy and listens.

“It’s a he,” Cy says. “I don’t know his name. He musta kept his name in another part of his brain. All I got was his right temporal lobe.

That's only an eighth of the cerebral cortex, so I'm seven-eighths me, and one-eighth him."

"I figured that was it." Lev had realized what was going on with Cy even before he stole the bandages from the pharmacy. Cy gave him the clue himself. *Do it before he changes my mind,* Cy had said. "So . . . he was a shoplifter?"

"He had . . . problems. I guess those problems are why his parents had him unwound in the first place. And now one of his problems is mine."

"Wow. That sucks."

CyFi laughs bitterly at that. "Yeah, Fry, it does."

"It's kind of like what happened to my brother Ray," says Lev. "He went to this government auction thing—ended up with ten acres on a lake, and it cost next to nothing. Then he finds out that the land came with a bunker full of toxic chemicals seeping into the ground. Now he owned it, so now it was his problem. Cost him almost ten times the cost of the land to clean up the chemicals."

"Sucker," says Cy.

"Yeah. But then, those chemicals weren't in his brain."

Cy looks down for a moment. "He's not a bad kid. He's just hurting. Hurting real bad." The way Cy's talking, it's like the kid is still there, right in the room with them. "He's got this urge about him to grab things—like an addiction, y'know? Shiny things mostly. It's not like he really wants them, it's just that he kind of needs to snap 'em up. I figure he's a kleptomaniac. That means . . . ah, hell, you know what it means."

"So, he talks to you?"

"No, not really. I didn't get the part of him that uses words. I get feelings mostly. Sometimes images, but usually just feelings. Urges. When I get an urge and I don't know where it's coming from, I know it's from him. Like the time I saw this Irish setter on the street and I wanted to go over and pet it. I'm not a dog person, see, but all of a sudden I just had to pet that pooch."

Now that Cy's talking about it, he can't stop. It's all spilling out like water over a dam. "Petting that dog was one thing, but the stealing is

another. The stealing makes me mad. I mean, here I am, a law-abiding citizen, never took nothing that didn't belong to me my whole life, and now I'm stuck with this. There's people out there—like that lady in the Christmas store—they see an umber kid like me and they automatically assume I'm up to no good. And now, thanks to this kid in my head, they're right. And you wanna know what's funny? This kid was lily-sienna, like you. Blond hair, blue eyes."

Hearing that surprises Lev. Not the description, but the fact that Cy can describe him at all. "You know what he looked like?"

CyFi nods. "I can see him sometimes. It's hard, but sometimes I can. I close my eyes and imagine myself looking into a mirror. Usually I just see myself reflected, but once in a while I can see him. It's only for an instant. Kinda like trying to catch a bolt of lightning after you've already seen the flash. But other people—they don't see *him* when he steals. It's me they see. *My* hands grabbing."

"The people who matter know it's not you. Your dads . . ."

"They don't even know about this!" Cy says. "They think they did me a favor stickin' me with this brain chunk. If I told them about it, they'd feel guilty until the end of time, so I can't tell them."

Lev doesn't know what to say. He wishes he'd never brought it up. He wishes he hadn't insisted on knowing. But most of all, he wishes Cy didn't have to deal with this. He's a good guy. He deserves a better break.

"And this kid—he doesn't even understand he's a part of me," Cy says. "It's like those ghosts that don't know they're dead. He keeps trying to be him, and can't understand why the rest of him ain't there."

All of a sudden Lev realizes something. "He lived in Joplin, didn't he!"

Cy doesn't answer for a long time. That's how Lev knows it's true. Finally Cy says, "There are things he's still got locked up in my brain that I can't get at. All I know is that he's got to get to Joplin, so I got to get there too. Once we're there, maybe he'll leave me alone."

CyFi shifts his shoulders—not in a shrug but in an uncomfortable roll, like when you get an itch in your back or a sudden shiver. "I don't

want to talk about him no more. His one-eighth feels a whole lot bigger when I spend time hanging around in his gray matter."

Lev wants to put his arm around Cy's shoulder like an older brother to comfort him, but he just can't bring himself to do it. So instead he pulls the blanket from the bed and wraps it around Cy as he sits in the chair.

"What's this all about?"

"Just making sure you two stay warm." And then he says, "Don't worry about anything. I've got it all under control."

CyFi laughs. "You? You can't even take care of yourself and now you think you're gonna take care of me? If it weren't for me you'd still be chowing down on other folk's garbage back at the mall."

"That's right—but you helped me. Now it's my turn to do the same for you. And I'm going to get you to Joplin."

OceanofPDF.com

22 · Risa

Risa Megan Ward watches everything around her closely and carefully. She's seen enough at StaHo to know that survival rests on how observant you are.

For three weeks she, Connor, and a mixed bag of Unwinds have been shuttled from one safe house to another. It's maddening, for there seems to be no end in sight to this relentless underground railroad of refugees.

There are dozens of kids being moved around, but there are never more than five or six at a time in any given safe house, and Risa rarely sees the same kids twice. The only reason she and Connor have been able to stay together is because they pose as a couple. It's practical, and it serves both their interests. What's that expression? The devil you know is better than the one you don't?

Finally, they're dumped in a huge, empty warehouse in a thundering air-traffic zone. Cheap realty for hiding unwanted kids. It's a spartan building with a corrugated steel roof that shakes so badly when a plane passes overhead, she half expects it to collapse.

There are almost thirty kids here when they arrive, many of them are kids Risa and Connor had come across over the past few weeks. This is a holding tank, she realizes, a place where all the kids are warehoused in preparation for some final journey. There are chains on the doors to keep anyone unwanted out, and to keep anyone too rebellious in. There are space heaters that are useless, since all the heat is lost to the high warehouse roof. There's only one bathroom with a broken lock and, unlike many of the safe houses, there's no shower, so personal hygiene is put on hold the moment they arrive. Put all that together with a gang of scared, angry kids, and you've got a powder keg waiting to explode. Perhaps that's why the people who run the show all carry guns.

There are four men and three women in charge, all of them militarized versions of the folks who, like Sonia, run the safe houses.

Everyone calls them "the Fatigues"—not just because they have a penchant toward khaki military clothing, but also because they always seem exhausted. Even so, they have a high-tension determination about them that Risa admires.

A handful of new kids arrives almost every day. Risa watches each group of arrivals with interest, and notices that Connor does too. She knows why.

"You're looking for Lev too, aren't you?" She finally says to him.

He shrugs. "Maybe I'm just looking for the Akron AWOL, like everyone else."

That makes Risa chuckle. Even in the safe houses they had heard the inflated rumors of an AWOL from Akron who escaped from a Juvey-cop by turning his own tranq pistol against him. *"Maybe he's on his way here!"* kids would whisper around the warehouse, like they were talking about a celebrity. Risa has no idea how the rumor started, since it was never in the news. She's also a bit annoyed that she's not included in the rumor. It ought to be a Bonnie-and-Clyde kind of thing. The rumor mill is definitely sexist.

"So are you ever going to tell them you're the Akron AWOL?" she quietly asks Connor.

"I don't want that kind of attention. Besides, they wouldn't believe me anyway. They're all saying the Akron AWOL is this big boeuf superhero. I don't want to disappoint them."

Lev doesn't show up with any of the batches of new kids. The only thing that arrives with them is an increase of tension. Forty-three kids by the end of their first week, and there's still one bathroom, no shower, and no answer as to how long this will last. Restlessness hangs as heavy as body odor in the air.

The Fatigues do their best to keep them all fed and occupied, if only to minimize friction. There are a few crates of games, incomplete decks of cards, and dog-eared books that no library wanted. There are no electronics, no balls—nothing that would create or encourage noise.

"If people out there hear you, then you're all done for," the Fatigues remind them as often as they can. Risa wonders if the Fatigues have

lives separate and apart from saving Unwinds, or if this endeavor is their life's work.

"Why are you doing this for us?" Risa asked one of them during their second week.

The Fatigue had been almost rote in her answer—like giving a sound bite to a reporter. "Saving you and others like you is an act of conscience," the woman had said. "Doing it is its own reward."

The Fatigues all talk like that. Big-Picture-speak, Risa calls it. Seeing the whole, and none of the parts. It's not just in their speech but in their eyes as well. When they look at Risa, she can tell they don't really see her. They seem to see the mob of Unwinds more as a concept rather than a collection of anxious kids, and so they miss all the subtle social tremors that shake things just as powerfully as the jets shake the roof.

By the end of the second week, Risa has a pretty good idea where trouble is brewing. It all revolves around one kid she hoped she'd never see again, but he had turned up shortly after she and Connor arrived.

Roland.

Of all the kids here, he is by far the most potentially dangerous. The troubling thing is that Connor hasn't exactly been the image of emotional stability himself this past week.

He'd been all right in the safe houses. He'd held his temper—he hadn't done anything too impulsive or irrational. Here, however, in the midst of so many kids, he's different. He's irritable and defiant. The slightest thing can set him off. He'd been in half a dozen fights already. She knows this must be why his parents chose to have him unwound—a firestorm temper can drive some parents to desperate measures.

Common sense tells Risa to distance herself from him. Their alliance has been one of necessity, but there's no reason to ally herself with him anymore. Yet, day after day, she keeps finding herself drawn to him . . . and worried about him.

She approaches him shortly after breakfast one day, determined to open his eyes to a clear and present danger. He's sitting by himself,

etching a portrait into the concrete floor with a rusty nail. Risa wishes she could say it was good, but Connor's not much of an artist. It disappoints her, because she desperately wants to find something redeeming about him. If he were an artist they could relate on a creative level. She could talk to him about her passion for music, and he would get it. As it is, she doesn't think he even knows, or cares, that she plays piano.

"Who are you drawing?" she asks.

"Just a girl I knew back home," he says.

Risa silently suffocates her jealousy in a quick emotional vacuum. "Someone you cared about?"

"Sort of."

Risa takes a better look at the sketch. "Her eyes are too big for her face."

"I guess that's because it's her eyes that I remember most."

"And her forehead's too low. The way you've drawn it, she'd have no room for a brain."

"Yeah, well, she wasn't all that bright."

Risa laughs at that, and it makes Connor smile. When he smiles, it's hard to imagine he's the same guy who got into all those fights. She gauges whether or not he'd be open to hear what she has to tell him.

He looks away from her. "Is there something you want, or are you just an art critic today?"

"I . . . was wondering why you're sitting by yourself."

"Ah, so you're also my shrink."

"We're supposed to be a couple. If we're going to keep up the image, you can't be entirely antisocial."

Connor looks out over the groups of kids, busy in various morning activities. Risa follows his gaze. There's a group of kids who hate the world, and spend all day spewing venom. There's a mouth-breathing kid who does nothing but read the same comic book over and over again. Mai is paired off with a glum spike-haired boy named Vincent, who's all leather and body piercings. He must be her soul mate, because they make out all day long, drawing a cluster of other kids who sit there and watch.

"I don't want to be social," Connor says. "I don't like the kids here."

"Why?" asks Risa, "They're too much like you?"

"They're losers."

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

He gives her a halfhearted dirty look, then looks down at his drawing, but she can tell he's not thinking about the girl—his head is somewhere else. "If I'm off by myself, then I don't get into fights." He puts down the nail, giving up on his etching. "I don't know what gets into me. Maybe it's all the voices. Maybe it's all the bodies moving all around me. It makes me feel like I've got ants crawling inside my brain and I want to scream. I can stand it just so long, then I blow. It happened even at home, everyone was talking at once at the dinner table. One time, we had family over and the talk got me so crazy, I hurled a plate at the china hutch. Glass blew everywhere. Ruined the meal. My parents asked me what got into me, and I couldn't tell them."

That Connor is willing to share this with her makes her feel good. It makes her feel closer to him. Maybe now that he has opened up, he'll stay open long enough to hear what she has to tell him.

"There's something I want to talk about."

"Yeah?"

Risa sits beside him, keeping her voice low.

"I want you to watch the other kids. Where they go. Who they talk to."

"All of them?"

"Yeah, but one at a time. After a while you'll start to notice things."

"Like what?"

"Like the kids who eat first are the ones who spend the most time with Roland—but he never goes to the front of the line himself. Like the way his closest friends infiltrate the other cliques and get them arguing so they break apart. Like the way Roland is especially nice to the kids that everyone else feels sorry for—but only until nobody feels sorry for them anymore. Then he uses them."

"Sounds like you're doing a class project on him."

"I'm being serious. I've seen this before. He's power hungry, he's ruthless, and he's very, very smart."

Connor laughs at that. "Roland? He couldn't think himself out of a paper bag."

"No, but he could think everyone else *into* one, and then crush it." Clearly that gives Connor pause for thought. *Good,* thinks Risa. *He needs to think. He needs to strategize.*

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're his biggest threat."

"Me?"

"You're a fighter—everyone knows that. And they also know that you don't take crap from anyone. Have you heard kids mumbling about how someone oughta do something about Roland?"

"Yeah."

"They only say that when you're close enough to hear. They're expecting *you* to do something about him—and Roland knows it."

He tries to wave her off, but she gets in his face.

"Listen to me, because I know what I'm talking about. Back at StaHo there were always dangerous kids who bullied their way into power. They were able to do it because they knew exactly who to take down, and when. And the kid they took down the hardest was the one with the greatest potential for taking *them* down."

She can see Connor curling his right hand into a fist. She knows she's not getting through to him. He's getting the wrong message.

"If he wants a fight, he'll get one."

"No! You can't take the bait! That's what he wants! He'll do everything within his power to pull you into a fight. But you can't do it."

Connor hardens his jaw. "You think I can't take him in a fight?"

Risa grabs his wrist and holds it tight. "A kid like Roland doesn't want to fight you. He wants to kill you."

OceanofPDF.com

23 · Connor

As much as Connor hates to admit it, Risa has been right about a lot of things. Her clarity of thought has saved them more than once, and now that he knows to look for it, her take on Roland's secret power structure is right on target. Roland is a master of structuring life around him for his own benefit. It's not the overt bullying that does it, either. It's the subtle manipulation of the situation. The bullying almost acts as cover for what's really going on. As long as people see him as a dumb, tough guy, they don't notice the more clever things he does . . . such as endearing himself to one of the Fatigues by making sure the man sees him giving his food to one of the younger kids. Like a master chess player, every move Roland makes has purpose, even if the purpose isn't immediately clear.

Risa wasn't just right about Roland, she was also right about Lev—or at least the way Connor feels about the kid. Connor hasn't been able to get Lev out of his mind. For the longest time he had convinced himself it was merely out of a desire for revenge, as if he couldn't wait to get even with him. But each time a new group of kids shows up and Lev isn't among them, a sense of despair worms its way through Connor's gut. It makes Connor angry that he feels this way, and he suspects this is part of the anger that fuels the fights he gets into.

The fact is, Lev hadn't just turned them in, he had turned himself in as well. Which means that Lev is probably gone. Unwound into nothing—his bones, his flesh, his mind, shredded and recycled. This is what Connor finds so hard to accept. Connor had risked his life to save Lev, just as Connor had done for the baby on the doorstep. Well, the baby had been saved, but Lev had not, and although he knows he can't be held responsible for Lev's unwinding, he feels as if it *is* his fault. So he stands there with secret anticipation each time there's a group of new arrivals, hoping beyond hope he'll find that self-righteous, self-important, pain-in-the-ass Lev still alive.

OceanofPDF.com

24 · Risa

The Fatigues arrive with Christmas dinner an hour late. It's the same old slop, but the Fatigues wear Santa hats. Impatience rules the evening. Everyone's so hungry, they crowd noisily around, like it's a food delivery in a famine, and to make it worse, there are only two Fatigues there tonight to serve the meal instead of the usual four.

"Single line! Single line!" yell the Fatigues. "There's enough for everybody. Ho, ho, ho." But tonight it's not a matter of getting enough, it's a matter of getting it *now*.

Risa's just as hungry as the others, but she also knows that meals are the best time to have some privacy in the bathroom, without someone bursting in through the unlocked door or simply pounding repeatedly to get you out faster. Tonight, with everyone clamoring for their holiday hash, there's no one at the bathroom at all, so, putting her hunger on hold, she moves away from the crowd and across the warehouse toward the bathroom.

Once inside she hangs the makeshift OCCUPIED sign on the door knob, and pushes the door closed. She takes a moment to examine herself in the mirror, but she doesn't like the straggly-haired, ragged girl she's become, so she doesn't look at herself for long. She washes her face and, since there are no towels, dries it with her sleeve. Then, before she even turns for the toilet, she hears the door creak open behind her.

She turns and must stifle a gasp. It's Roland who has entered the bathroom. And now he closes the door gently behind him. Risa immediately realizes her mistake. She should never have come here alone.

"Get out!" she says. She wishes she could sound more forceful in the moment, but he's caught her by surprise.

"No need to be so harsh." Roland moves toward her in a slow, predatory stride. "We're all friends here, right? And since everyone's

eating dinner, we've got some quality time to get to know each other."

"Stay away from me!" Now she's scanning her options, but realizes in this tight a space, with only one door, and nothing she can use as a weapon, her options are limited.

Now he's dangerously close. "Sometimes I like having dessert before dinner. How about you?"

The second he's in range, she acts quickly to hit him, to knee him, to inflict any kind of pain that would distract him enough for her to fly out the door. His reflexes are simply too fast. He grabs her hands, pushes her back against the cold green tile wall, and presses his hip against her so that her knee can't reach its mark. And he grins, as if it was all so easy. His hand is on her cheek now. The shark tattooed on his forearm is inches away, and seems ready to attack.

"So, whaddaya say we have some fun and make sure you don't get unwound for nine months?"

Risa has never been a screamer. The way she always saw it, screaming was a show of weakness. A sign of defeat. Now she has to admit defeat, for although she has lots of experience warding off creeps, Roland has even more experience being one.

So she screams. She lets loose a bloodcurdler at the top of her lungs. But her timing is as bad as it could possibly be, because just then a jet roars by overhead, shaking the walls and completely swallowing her scream.

"Ya gotta learn to enjoy life," Roland says. "Let's call this lesson one."

That's when the door swings open, and over Roland's massive shoulder Risa sees Connor standing at the threshold, eyes blazing. She's never been happier to see anyone.

"Connor! Stop him!"

Roland sees him too, catching his reflection in the bathroom mirror, but he doesn't release Risa.

"Well," says Roland. "Isn't *this* awkward."

Connor makes no move to tear him away. He just stands there on the threshold. His eyes still rage, but his hands—they're not even

clenched into fists. They just hang there limply by his side. What's wrong with him?

Roland winks at Risa, then he calls over his shoulder to Connor. "Better get out if you know what's good for you."

Connor steps over the threshold, but he doesn't move toward them. Instead he goes to the sink. "Mind if I wash up for dinner?"

Risa waits for him to make a sharp and sudden move, catching Roland off guard, but he doesn't. He just washes his hands.

"Your girlfriend's had her eye on me since Sonia's basement," says Roland. "You know that, don't you?"

Connor dries his hands on his pants. "You two can do whatever you like. Risa and I broke up this morning. Should I turn off the light when I leave?"

The betrayal is so unexpected, so complete, Risa doesn't know who to hate more, Roland or Connor. But then Roland eases his grip on her. "Well, now the mood's ruined, isn't it." He lets her go. "Hell, I was just kidding, anyway. I wouldn't have done anything." He backs away and offers that smile of his again. "How's about we wait until you're ready." Then he struts out just as boldly as he had come in, bumping Connor's shoulder on the way out as a parting shot.

All of her confusion and frustration unleashes at Connor, and she pushes him back against the wall, shaking him. "What was that? You were just going to let him do it? You were just going to stand there and let it happen?"

Connor pushes her off of him. "Didn't you warn me not to take the bait?"

"What?"

"He didn't just follow you to the bathroom—he pushed past me first. *He made sure I knew he was following you here.* This whole thing wasn't about you, it was about me—just like you said. He *wanted* me to catch him. He wanted to make me crazy, to get me fighting mad. So I didn't take the bait."

Risa shakes her head—not in disbelief, but reeling from the truth of it. "But . . . but what if . . . what if he . . ."

“But he didn’t, did he? And now he won’t. Because if he thinks you and I broke up, you’re more useful to him if you’re on his side. He might still be after you, but from now on, I’ll bet he’ll be killing you with kindness.”

All the emotions rebounding madly through Risa finally come to rest in an unfamiliar place, and tears burst from her eyes. Connor steps forward to comfort her, but she pushes him away with the same force she would have used against Roland.

“Get out!” she yells. “Just get out!”

Connor throws up his hands, frustrated. “Fine. I guess I should have just gone to dinner and not come in here at all.”

He leaves and she closes the door behind him, in spite of the line of kids now waiting for the bathroom. She sits down on the floor, her back against the door so no one can get in as she tries to get her emotions under control.

Connor had done the right thing. For once, he had seen the situation more clearly than she—and he had probably ensured that Roland wouldn’t physically threaten her again, at least for a while. And yet there’s a part of her that can’t forgive him for just standing there. After all, heroes are supposed to behave in very specific ways. They’re supposed to fight, even if it means risking their lives.

This is the moment Risa realizes that, even with all his troubles, she sees Connor as a hero.

OceanofPDF.com

25 · Connor

Holding his temper in that bathroom was perhaps the hardest thing Connor had ever had to do. Even now, as he storms away from Risa, he wants to lay into Roland—but blind rage is not what the moment needs, and Connor knows it. Risa's right—a brutal, all-out fight is exactly what Roland wants—and Connor's heard from some of the other kids that Roland has fashioned himself a knife out of some metal he found lying around the warehouse. If Connor launches at him with a rage of swinging fists, Roland will find a way to end it with a single deadly thrust—and he'll be able to get away with it, claiming it was self-defense.

Whether Connor can take him in a fight isn't the question. Even against a knife, Connor suspects he might be able to either turn the blade against him, or take Roland out in some other way before he has the chance to use it. The question is this: Is Connor willing to enter a battle that must end with one of them dead? Connor might be a lot of things, but he's no killer. So he holds his temper and plays it cool.

This is new territory for him. The fighter in him screams foul, but another side of him, a side that's growing steadily stronger, enjoys this exercise of silent power—and it *is* power, because Roland now behaves exactly the way he and Risa want him to. Connor sees Roland offer his dessert to Risa that night as an apology. She doesn't accept it, of course, but it doesn't change the fact that he offered it. It's as if Roland thinks his attack on her could be wiped away by feigning remorse—not because he's actually sorry for what he did, but because it serves Roland's needs to treat her well now. He has no idea that Risa and Connor have him on an invisible leash. Connor knows it will only be a matter of time, however, until he chews his way through it.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Four

Destinations

The following is a response from eBay with regard to a seller's attempt to auction his soul online in 2001.

Thank you for taking the time to write eBay with your concerns. I'm happy to help you further.

If the soul does not exist, eBay could not allow the auctioning of the soul because there would be nothing to sell. However, if the soul does exist, then in accordance with eBay's policy on human parts and remains we would not allow the auctioning of human souls. The soul would be considered human remains; and although it is not specifically stated on the policy page, human souls are still not allowed to be listed on eBay. Your auction was removed appropriately and will not be reinstated. Please do not relist this item with us in the future.

You may review our policy at the following link: http://pages.ebay.com/help/policies/remains.html.

It is my pleasure to assist you. Thank you for choosing eBay.

OceanofPDF.com

26 · Pawnbroker

The man inherited the pawnshop from his brother, who had died of a heart attack. He wouldn't have kept the place, but he inherited it while he was unemployed. He figured he could keep it and run it until he could find a better job. That was twenty years ago. Now he knows it's a life sentence.

A boy comes into his shop one evening before closing. Not his usual type of customer. Most folks come into a pawnshop down on their luck, ready to trade in everything they own, from TVs to family heirlooms, in exchange for a little quick cash. Some do it for drugs. Others have more legitimate reasons. Either way, the pawnbroker's success is based on the misery of others. It doesn't bother him anymore. He's grown used to it.

This boy is different, though. Sure, there are kids who come in, hoping to get a deal on items that were never claimed, but there's something about this kid that's markedly off. He looks more clean-cut than the kids that usually turn up in his store. And the way he moves, even the way he holds himself, is refined and graceful, deliberate and delicate, like he's lived his life as a prince and is now pretending to be the pauper. He wears a puffy white coat, but it's a bit dirty. Maybe he's the pauper after all.

The TV on the counter plays a football game, but the pawnbroker isn't watching the game anymore. His eyes are on it, but his mind is keeping track of the kid as he meanders through the shop, looking at things, like he might want to buy something.

After a few minutes, the kid approaches the counter.

"What can I do for you?" the pawnbroker asks, genuinely curious.

"This is a pawnshop isn't it?"

"Doesn't it says so on the door?"

"So that means you trade things for money, right?"

The pawnbroker sighs. The kid's just ordinary after all, just a little more naive than the other kids who show up here trying to hock their baseball card collections or whatever. Usually they want money for cigarettes or alcohol or something else they don't want their parents to know about. This kid doesn't look like the type for that, though.

"We *loan* money, and take objects of value as collateral," he tells the kid. "And we don't do business with minors. You wanna buy something, fine, but you can't pawn anything here, so take your baseball cards somewhere else."

"Who said I have baseball cards?"

Then the kid reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bracelet, all diamonds and gold.

The pawnbroker's eyes all but pop out of his skull as the kid dangles it from his fingers. Then the pawnbroker laughs. "Whad'ya do, steal that from your mommy, kid?"

The kid's expression stays diamond hard. "How much will you give me for it?"

"How about a nice boot out the door?"

Still, the kid shows no sign of fear or disappointment. He just lays the bracelet on the worn wooden counter with that same princely grace.

"Why don't you just put that thing away and go home?"

"I'm an Unwind."

"What?"

"You heard me."

This throws the pawnbroker for a loop for a whole lot of reasons. First of all, runaway Unwinds who show up at his shop never admit it. Secondly, they always appear desperate and angry, and the stuff they have to sell is shoddy at best. They're never this calm, and they never look this . . . angelic.

"You're an Unwind?"

The boy nods. "The bracelet is stolen, but not from anywhere around here."

Unwinds also never admit that their items are stolen. Those other kids always come up with the most elaborate stories as to who they

are, and why they're selling. The pawnbroker will usually listen to their stories for their entertainment value. If it's a good story, he'll just throw the kid out. If it's a lousy story, he'll call the police and have them picked up. This kid, however, doesn't have a story; he comes only with the truth. The pawnbroker doesn't quite know how to deal with the truth.

"So," says the kid. "Are you interested?"

The pawnbroker just shrugs. "Who you are is your business, and like I said, I don't deal with minors."

"Maybe you'll make an exception."

The pawnbroker considers the kid, considers the bracelet, then looks at the door to make sure no one else is coming in. "I'm listening."

"Here's what I want. Five hundred dollars, cash. Now. Then I leave like we never met, and you can keep the bracelet."

The pawnbroker puts on his well-practiced poker face. "Are you kidding me? This piece of junk? Gold plate, zircons instead of diamonds, poor workmanship—I'll give you a hundred bucks, not a penny more."

The kid never breaks eye contact. "You're lying."

Of course the pawnbroker is lying, but he resents the accusation. "How about if I turn you in to the Juvey-cops right now?"

The kid reaches down and takes the bracelet from the table. "You could," he says. "But then you won't get this—the police will."

The pawnbroker strokes his beard. Maybe this kid isn't as naive as he looks.

"If it were a piece of junk," the kid says, "you wouldn't have offered me a hundred. I'll bet you wouldn't have offered me anything." He looks at the bracelet dangling from his fingers. "I really don't know what something like this is worth, but I'll bet it's worth thousands. All I'm asking is five hundred, which means, whatever it's worth, you're getting a great deal."

The pawnbroker's poker face is gone. He can't stop staring at the bracelet—it's all he can do not to drool over it. He knows what it's really worth, or at least he can guess. He knows where he can fence it

himself for five times what the kid is asking. That would be a nice bit of change. Enough to take his wife on that long vacation she's always wanted.

"Two hundred fifty. That's my final offer."

"Five hundred. You have three seconds, and then I leave. One . . . two . . ."

"Deal." The pawnbroker sighs as if he's been beaten. "You drive a hard bargain, kid." That's the way these things are played. Make the kid think that he won, when all the while he's the one who's truly being robbed! The pawnbroker reaches for the bracelet, but the kid holds it out of reach.

"First the money."

"The safe's in the back room—I'll be back in a second."

"I'll come with you."

The pawnbroker doesn't argue. It's understandable that the kid doesn't trust him. If he trusted people, he'd have been unwound by now. In the back room, the pawnbroker positions himself with the kid behind him, so the kid can't see the combination of the safe. He pulls open the door, and the second he does, he feels something hard and heavy connecting with his head. His thoughts are instantly scrambled. He loses consciousness before he hits the ground.

The pawnbroker comes to sometime later, with a headache and a faint memory that something had gone wrong. It takes a few seconds for him to pull himself together and realize exactly what happened. That little monster conned him! He got him to open the safe, and the moment he did, he knocked him out and cleaned out the safe.

Sure enough, the safe is open wide—but it's not entirely empty. Inside is the bracelet, its gold and diamonds looking even brighter against the ugly gray steel of the empty safe. How much money had been in the safe? Fifteen hundred, tops. This bracelet is worth at least three times that. Still a deal—and the kid knew it.

The pawnbroker rubs the painful knot on his head, furious at the kid for what he did and yet admiring him for the strangely honorable nature of the crime. If he himself had been this clever, this honorable,

and had found this kind of nerve when he was a kid, perhaps he'd be more than just a pawnbroker.

OceanofPDF.com

27 · Connor

The morning after the bathroom incident, they are rousted awake by the Fatigues before dawn. "Everybody up! Now! Move it! Move it!" They're loud, they're on edge, and the first thing Connor notices is that the safeties on their weapons are off. Still bleary from sleep, he rises and looks for Risa. He sees her already being herded by two Fatigues toward a huge double door that has always been padlocked. Now the padlock is off.

"Leave your things! Go! Move it! Move it!"

To his right, a cranky kid pushes a Fatigue for tearing away his blanket. The Fatigue hits him on the shoulder with the butt of his rifle —not enough to seriously wound him, but enough to make it clear to the kid, and everyone else, that they mean business. The kid goes down on his knees, gripping his shoulder and cursing, and the Fatigue goes about the business of herding the others. Even in his pain, the kid looks ready for a fight. As Connor passes him, Connor grabs him by the arm and helps him up.

"Take it easy," Connor says. "Don't make it worse."

The kid pulls out of Connor's grip. "Get off me! I don't need your stinkin' help." The kid storms away. Connor shakes his head. Was he ever that belligerent?

Up ahead, the huge double doors are slid open to reveal another room of the warehouse that the Unwinds have never seen. This one is filled with crates—old airline packing crates, designed, both in shape and durability, to transport goods by air freight. Connor immediately realizes what they're for—and why he and the others have been warehoused so close to an airport. Wherever they're going, they're going as air cargo.

"Girls to the left, boys to the right. Move it! Move it!"

There's grumbling, but no direct defiance. Connor wonders how many kids get what's going on.

"Four to a crate! Boys with boys, girls with girls. Move it! Move it!"

Now everyone begins to scramble around, trying to team up with their preferred travel companions, but the Fatigues have neither patience nor time for it. They randomly create groups of four and push them toward the crates.

That's when Connor notices how dangerously close he is to Roland—and it's no accident. Roland moved close to him on purpose. Connor can just imagine it. Pitch black and close quarters. If he's in a crate with Roland, then he'll be dead before takeoff.

Connor tries to move away, but a Fatigue grabs Roland, Connor, and two of Roland's known collaborators. "You four. That crate over there!"

Connor tries not to let his panic show; he doesn't want Roland to see. He should have prepared his own weapon, like the one Roland certainly has concealed on him now. He should have prepared for the inevitability of a life-or-death confrontation, but he hadn't, and now his options are limited.

No time for thinking this through, so he lets impulse take over and gives in to his fighting instincts. He turns to one of Roland's henchmen and punches him in the face hard enough to draw blood, maybe even break his nose. The force of the punch spins the kid around, but before he can come back for a counterassault, a Fatigue grabs Connor and smashes him back against the concrete wall. The Fatigue doesn't know it, but this is *exactly* what Connor wanted.

"You picked the wrong day to do that, kid!" says the Fatigue, holding him against the wall with his rifle.

"What are you gonna do, kill me? I thought you were trying to save us."

That gives the Fatigue a moment's pause.

"Hey!" yells another Fatigue. "Forget him! We gotta load them up." Then he grabs another kid to complete the foursome with Roland and his henchmen, sending them toward a crate. They don't even care about the one kid's bleeding nose.

The Fatigue holding Connor against the wall sneers at him. "The sooner you're in a box, the sooner you're somebody else's problem."

“Nice socks,” says Connor.

They put Connor in a four-by-eight crate that already has three kids waiting to complete their quartet. The crate is sealed even before he can see who’s inside with him, but as long as it’s not Roland, it will do.

“We’re all gonna die in here,” says a nasal voice, followed by a wet sniff that doesn’t sound like it clears much of anything. Connor knows this kid by his mucous. He’s not sure of his name—everyone just calls him “the Mouth Breather,” since his nose is perpetually stuffed. Emby, for short. He’s the one always obsessively reading his comic book, but he can’t quite do that in here.

“Don’t talk like that,” says Connor. “If the Fatigues wanted to kill us, they would have done it a long time ago.”

The Mouth Breather has foul breath that’s filling up the whole crate. “Maybe they got found out. Maybe the Juvey-cops are on their way, and the only way to save themselves is to destroy the evidence!”

Connor has little patience for whiners. It reminds him too much of his younger brother. The one his parents chose to keep. “Shut up, Emby, or I swear I’m going to take off my sock, shove it in your stinky mouth, and you’ll finally have to figure out a way to breathe through your nose!”

“Let me know if you need an extra sock,” says a voice just across from him. “Hi, Connor. It’s Hayden.”

“Hey, Hayden.” Connor reaches out and finds Hayden’s shoe, squeezing it—the closest thing to a greeting in the claustrophobic darkness. “So, who’s lucky number four?” No answer. “Sounds like we must be traveling with a mime.” Another long pause, then Connor hears a deep, accented voice.

“Diego.”

“Diego doesn’t talk much,” says Hayden.

“I figured.”

They wait in silence, punctuated by the Mouth Breather’s snorts.

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” Emby mumbles.

“You should have thought of that before you left,” says Hayden, putting on his best mother voice. “How many times do we have to tell you? Always use the potty before climbing into a shipping crate.”

There's some sort of mechanical activity outside, then they feel the crate moving.

"I don't like this," whines Emby.

"We're being moved," says Hayden.

"By forklift, probably," says Connor. The Fatigues are probably long gone by now. What was it that one Fatigue had said? *Once you're in a box, you're somebody else's problem.* Whoever's been hired to ship them probably has no clue what's in the crates. Soon they'll be on board some aircraft, headed to an undisclosed destination. The thought of it makes him think about the rest of his family and their trip to the Bahamas—the one they'd planned to take once Connor was unwound. He wonders if they went—would they still take their vacation, even after Connor had kicked-AWOL? Sure they would. They were planning to take it once he got unwound, so why would his escape stop them? Hey, wouldn't it be funny if they were being shipped to the Bahamas too?

"We're gonna suffocate! I know it!" announces the Mouth Breather.

"Will you shut up?" says Connor. "I'm sure there's more than enough air in here for us."

"How do *you* know? I can barely breathe already—and I got asthma, too. I could have an asthma attack in here and die!"

"Good," says Connor. "One less person breathing the air."

That shuts Emby up, but Connor feels bad having said it. "No one's going to die," he says. "Just relax."

And then Hayden says, "At least dying's better than being unwound. Or is it? Let's take a poll—would you rather die, or be unwound?"

"Don't ask things like that!" snaps Connor. "I don't want to think about either." Somewhere outside of their little crated universe, Connor hears a metal hatch closing and can feel the vibration in his feet as they begin to taxi. Connor waits. Engines power up—he can feel the vibration in his feet. He's pushed back against the wall as they accelerate. Hayden tumbles into him, and he shifts over, giving Hayden room to get comfortable again.

"What's happening? What's happening?" cries Emby.

"Nothing. We're just taking off."

"What! We're on a *plane*?"

Connor rolls his eyes, but the gesture is lost in the darkness.

* * *

The box is like a coffin. The box is like a womb. Normal measures of time don't seem to apply, and the unpredictable turbulence of flight fills the dark space with an ever-present tension.

Once they're airborne, the four kids don't speak for a very long time. Half an hour, an hour maybe—it's hard to tell. Everyone's mind is trapped in the holding pattern of their own uneasy thoughts. The plane hits some rough air. Everything around them rattles. Connor wonders if there are kids in crates above them, below them, and on every side. He can't hear their voices if they are. From where he sits, it feels like the four of them are the only ones in the universe. Emby silently relieves himself. Connor knows because he can smell it—everyone can, but no one says anything. It could just as easily have been any one of them—and depending on how long this trip is, it still could be.

Finally, after what feels like forever, the quietest of them all speaks.

"Unwound," Diego says. "I'd rather be unwound."

Even though it's been a long time since Hayden posed the question, Connor knows immediately what it refers to. *Would you rather die or be unwound?* It's like the question has hung in the cramped darkness all this time, waiting to be answered.

"Not me," says Emby. "Because if you die, at least you go to Heaven."

Heaven? thinks Connor. More likely they'd go to the other place. Because if their own parents didn't care enough about them to keep them, who would want them in Heaven?

"What makes you think Unwinds don't go?" Diego asks Emby.

"Because Unwinds aren't really dead. They're still alive . . . sort of. I mean, they have to use every single part of us somewhere, right? That's the law."

Then Hayden asks the question. Not *a* question, *the* question. Asking it is the great taboo among those marked for unwinding. It's

what everyone thinks about, but no one ever dares to ask out loud.

"So, then," says Hayden, "if every part of you is alive but inside someone else . . . are you alive or are you dead?"

This, Connor knows, is Hayden bringing his hand back and forth across the flame again. Close enough to feel it, but not close enough to burn. But it's not just his own hand now, it's everyone's, and it ticks Connor off.

"Talking wastes our oxygen," Connor says. "Let's just agree that unwinding sucks and leave it at that."

It shuts everyone up, but only for a minute. It's Emby who talks next.

"I don't think unwinding is bad," he says. "I just don't want it to happen to me."

Connor wants to ignore him but can't. If there's one thing that Connor can't abide, it's an Unwind who defends unwinding. "So it's all right if it happens to us but not if it happens to you?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did."

"Ooh," says Hayden. "This is getting good."

"They say it's painless," says Emby—as if that were any consolation.

"Yeah?" says Connor. "Well, why don't you go ask all the pieces of Humphrey Dunfee how painless it was?"

The name settles like a frost around them. The jolts and rattles of turbulence grow sharper.

"So . . . you heard that story too?" says Diego.

"Just because there are stories like that, doesn't mean unwinding is all bad," says Emby. "It helps people."

"You sound like a tithe," says Diego.

Connor finds himself personally insulted by that. "No, he doesn't. I know a tithe. His ideas might have been a little bit out there, but he wasn't stupid." The thought of Lev brings with it a wave of despair. Connor doesn't fight it—he just lets it wash through him, then drain away. He doesn't *know* a tithe; he *knew* one. One who has certainly met his destiny by now.

"Are you calling me stupid?" says Emby.

"I think I just did."

Hayden laughs. "Hey, the Mouth Breather is right—unwinding does help people. If it wasn't for unwinding, there'd be bald guys again—and wouldn't that be horrible?"

Diego snickers, but Connor is not the least bit amused. "Emby, why don't you do us all a favor and use your mouth for breathing instead of talking until we land, or crash, or whatever."

"You might think I'm stupid, but I got a good reason for the way I feel," Emby says. "When I was little, I was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. Both my lungs were shutting down. I was gonna die. So they took out both my dying lungs and gave me a single lung from an Unwind. The only reason I'm alive is because that kid got unwound."

"So," says Connor, "your life is more important than his?"

"He was already unwound—it's not like I did it to him. If I didn't get that lung, someone else would have."

In his anger, Connor's voice begins to rise, even though Emby's only a couple of feet away at most. "If there wasn't unwinding, there'd be fewer surgeons, and more doctors. If there wasn't unwinding, they'd go back to trying to cure diseases instead of just replacing stuff with someone else's."

And suddenly the Mouth Breather's voice rings out with a ferocity that catches Connor by surprise.

"Wait till you're the one who's dying and see how you feel about it!"

"I'd rather die than get a piece of an Unwind!" Connor yells back.

The Mouth Breather tries to shout something else, but instead goes into a coughing fit that lasts for a whole minute. It gets so bad, it frightens even Connor. It's like he might actually cough up his transplanted lung.

"You okay?" asks Diego.

"Yeah," says Emby, trying to get it under control. "Like I said, the lung's got asthma. It was the best we could afford."

By the time his coughing fit is over, it seems there's nothing more to say. Except this:

"If your parents went to all that trouble," asks Hayden, "why were they having you unwound?"

Hayden and his questions. This one shuts Emby down for a few moments. It's clearly a tough topic for him—maybe even tougher than it is for most Unwinds.

"My *parents* didn't sign the order," Emby finally says. "My dad died when I was little, and my mom died two months ago. That's when my aunt took me in. The thing is, my mom left me some money, but my aunt's got three kids of her own to put through college, so . . ."

He doesn't have to finish. The others can connect the dots.

"Man, that stinks," says Diego.

"Yeah," says Connor, his anger at Emby now transferred to Emby's aunt.

"It's always about money," Hayden says. "When my parents were splitting up, they fought over money, until there was none left. Then they fought over me. So I got out before there was none of me left, either."

Silence falls again. There's nothing to hear but the drone of the engine, and the rattle of the crates. The air is humid and it's a struggle to breathe. Connor wonders if maybe the Fatigues miscalculated about how much air they had. *We're all gonna die in here.* That's what Emby said. Connor bangs his head back sharply against the wall, hoping to jar loose the bad thoughts clinging to his brain. This is not a good place to be alone with your thoughts. Perhaps that's why Hayden feels compelled to talk.

"No one ever answered my question," Hayden says. "Looks like no one has the guts."

"Which one?" asks Connor. "You've got questions coming out of you like farts on Thanksgiving."

"I was asking if unwinding kills you, or if it leaves you alive somehow. C'mon—it's not like we haven't thought about it."

Emby says nothing. He's clearly been weakened by coughing and conversation. Connor's not interested in volunteering either.

"It depends," says Diego. "Depends on where your soul is once you're unwound."

Normally Connor would walk away from a conversation like this. His life is about tangibles: things you can see, hear, and touch. God,

souls, and all that has always been like a secret in a black box he couldn't see into, so it was easier to just leave it alone. Only now, he's inside the black box.

"What do you think, Connor?" asks Hayden. "What happens to your soul when you get unwound?"

"Who says I even got one?"

"For the sake of argument, let's say you do."

"Who says I want an argument?"

"*Ijolé!* Just give him an answer, man, or he won't leave you alone."

Connor squirms, but can't squirm his way out of the box. "How should I know what happens to it? Maybe it gets all broken up like the rest of us into a bunch of little pieces."

"But a soul isn't like that," says Diego. "It's indivisible."

"If it's indivisible," says Hayden, "maybe an Unwind's spirit stretches out, kind of like a giant balloon between all those parts of us in other places. Very poetic."

Hayden might find poetry in it, but to Connor the thought is terrifying. He tries to imagine himself stretched so thin and so wide that he can reach around the world. He imagines his spirit like a web strung between the thousand recipients of his hands, his eyes, the fragments of his brain—none of it under his control anymore, all absorbed by the bodies and wills of others. Could consciousness exist like that? He thinks about the trucker who performed a card trick for him with an Unwind's hand. Did the boy who once owned that hand still feel the satisfaction of performing the trick? Was his spirit still inexplicably whole, even though his flesh had been shuffled like that deck of cards, or was he shredded beyond all hope of awareness—beyond Heaven, Hell, or anything eternal? Whether or not souls exist Connor doesn't know. But consciousness *does* exist—that's something he knows for sure. If every part of an Unwind is still alive, then that consciousness has to go somewhere, doesn't it? He silently curses Hayden for making him think about it . . . but Hayden isn't done done yet.

"Here's a little brain clot for you," says Hayden. "I knew this girl back home. There was something about her that made you want to

listen to the things she had to say. I don't know whether she was really well-centered, or just psychotic. She believed that if someone actually gets unwound, then they never had a soul to begin with. She said God must know who's going to be unwound, and he doesn't give them souls."

Diego grunts his disapproval. "I don't like the sound of that."

"This girl had it all worked out in her head," continued Hayden. "She believed Unwinds are like the unborn."

"Wait a second," says Emby, finally breaking his silence. "The unborn have souls. They have souls from the moment they get made—the law says."

Connor doesn't want to get into it again with Emby, but he can't help himself. "Just because the law says it, that doesn't make it true."

"Yeah, well, just because the law says it, that doesn't make it false, either. It's only the law because a whole lot of people thought about it, and decided it made sense."

"Hmm," says Diego. "The Mouth Breather has a point."

Maybe so, but the way Connor sees it, a point ought to be sharper than that. "How can you pass laws about things that nobody knows?"

"They do it all the time," says Hayden. "That's what law is: educated guesses at right and wrong."

"And what the law says is fine with me," says Emby.

"But if it weren't for the law, would you still believe it?" asks Hayden. "Share with us a a personal opinion, Emby. Prove there's more than snot in that cranium of yours."

"You're wasting your time," says Connor. "There's not."

"Give our congested friend a chance," says Hayden.

They wait. The sound of the engine changes. Connor can feel them begin a slow descent, and wonders if the others can feel it too. Then Emby says, "Unborn babies . . . they suck their thumbs sometimes, right? And they kick. Maybe before that they're just like a bunch of cells or something, but once they kick and suck their thumbs—that's when they've got a soul."

"Good for you!" says Hayden. "An opinion! I knew you could do it."

Connor's head begins to spin. Was it the plane's banking, or a lack of oxygen?

"Connor, fair is fair—Emby found an opinion somewhere in his questionable gray matter. Now you have to give yours."

Connor sighs, not having the strength to fight anymore. He thinks about the baby he and Risa so briefly shared. "If there's such a thing as a soul—and I'm not saying that there is—then it comes when a baby's born into the world. Before that, it's just part of the mother."

"No, it's not!" says Emby.

"Hey—he wanted my opinion, I gave it."

"But it's wrong!"

"You see, Hayden? You see what you started?"

"Yes!" Hayden says excitedly. "It looks like we're about to have our own little Heartland War. Pity it's too dark for us to watch it."

"If you want my opinion, you're both wrong," says Diego. "The way I see it, it's got nothing to do with all of that. It has to do with love."

"Uh-oh," says Hayden. "Diego's getting romantic. I'm moving to the other end of the crate."

"No, I'm serious. A person don't got a soul until that person is loved. If a mother loves her baby—*wants* her baby—it's got a soul from the moment she knows it's there. The moment you're loved, that's when you got your soul. *Punto!*"

"Yeah?" says Connor. "Well, what about all those babies that get storked—or all those kids in state schools?"

"They just better hope somebody loves them some day."

Connor snorts dismissively, but in spite of himself, he can't dismiss it entirely, any more than he can dismiss the other things he's heard today. He thinks about his parents. Did they ever love him? Certainly they did when he was little. And just because they stopped, it didn't mean his soul was stolen away . . . although sometimes to admit that it felt like it was. Or at least, part of it died when his parents signed the order.

"Diego, that's really sweet," Hayden says in his best mocking voice. "Maybe you should write greeting cards."

"Maybe I should write them on your face."

Hayden just laughs.

"You always poke fun at other people's opinions," says Connor, "so how come you never give your own?"

"Yeah," says Emby.

"You're always playing people for your own entertainment. Now it's your turn. Entertain *us*."

"Yeah," says Emby.

"So tell us," says Connor, "in *The World According to Hayden*, when do we start to live?"

A long silence from Hayden, and then he says quietly, uneasily, "I don't know."

Emby razzes him. "That's not an answer."

But Connor reaches out and grabs Emby's arm, to shut him up—because Emby's wrong. Even though Connor can't see Hayden's face, he can hear the truth of it in his voice. There was no hint of evasion in Hayden's words. This was raw honesty, void of Hayden's usual flip attitude. It was perhaps the first truly honest thing Connor had ever heard him say. "Yes, it is an answer," Connor says. "Maybe it's the best answer of all. If more people could admit they really don't know, maybe there never would have been a Heartland War."

There's a mechanical jolt beneath them. Emby gasps.

"Landing gear," says Connor.

"Oh, right."

In a few minutes they'll be there, wherever "there" is. Connor tries to guess how long they've been in the air. Ninety minutes? Two hours? There's no telling what direction they've been flying. They could be touching down anywhere. Or maybe Emby was right. Maybe it's piloted by remote control and they're just ditching the whole plane in the ocean to get rid of the evidence. Or what if it's worse than that? What if . . . what if . . .

"What if it's a harvest camp after all?" says Emby. Connor doesn't tell him to shut up this time, because he's thinking the same thing.

It's Diego who answers him. "If it is, then I want my fingers to go to a sculptor. So he can use them to craft something that will last forever."

They all think about that. Hayden is the next to speak.

"If I'm unwound," says Hayden, "I want my eyes to go to a photographer—one who shoots supermodels. That's what I want these eyes to see."

"My lips'll go to a rock star," says Connor.

"These legs are definitely going to the Olympics."

"My ears to an orchestra conductor."

"My stomach to a food critic."

"My biceps to a body builder."

"I wouldn't wish my sinuses on anybody."

And they're all laughing as the plane touches down.

OceanofPDF.com

28 · Risa

Risa doesn't know what went on in Connor's crate. She assumes guys talk about guy things, whatever those things are. She has no way of knowing that what occurred in his crate was a reenactment of what happened in her own, and in almost every other container on the plane. Fear, misgivings, questions rarely asked, and stories rarely told. The details are different, of course, as are the players, but the gist is the same. No one will discuss these things again, or even acknowledge having ever discussed them at all, but because of it, invisible bonds have been forged. Risa has gotten to know an overweight girl prone to tears, a girl wound up from a week of nicotine withdrawal, and a girl who was a ward of the state, just like her—and also just like Risa, an unwitting victim of budget cuts. Her name is Tina. The others told their names, but Tina's is the only one she remembers.

"We're exactly the same," Tina had said sometime during the flight. "We could be twins." Even though Tina is umber, Risa has to admit that it's true. It's comforting to know there are others in the same situation, but troubling to think her own life is just one of a thousand pirate copies. Sure, the Unwinds from state homes all have different faces, but otherwise, their stories are the same. They even all have the same last name, and she silently curses whoever it was who determined that they should all be named Ward—as if being one weren't enough of a stigma.

The plane touches down, and they wait.

"What's taking so long?" asks the nicotine girl, impatiently. "I can't stand this!"

"Maybe they're moving us to a truck, or another plane," suggests the pudgy girl.

"They'd better not be," says Risa. "There's not enough air in here for another trip."

There's noise—someone's outside the crate. "Shhh!" says Risa. "Listen." Footsteps. Banging. She hears voices, although she can't make out what the voices say. Then someone unlatches a side of the crate and pulls it open a crack. Hot, dry air spills in. The sliver of light from the plane's hold seems bright as sunlight after the hours of darkness.

"Is everyone all right in there?" It's not a Fatigue—Risa can tell right away. The voice is younger.

"We're okay," Risa says. "Can we get out of here?"

"Not yet. We gotta open all the other crates first and get everyone some fresh air." From what Risa can see, this is just a kid her age, maybe even younger. He wears a beige tank top and khaki pants. He's sweaty, and his cheeks are tan. No, not just tan: sunburned.

"Where are we?" Tina asks.

"The graveyard," says the kid, and moves on to the next crate.

* * *

In a few minutes the crate is opened all the way, and they're free. Risa takes a moment to look at her travel companions. The three girls look remarkably different from her memory of them when they first got in. Getting to know someone in blind darkness changes your impression of them. The large girl isn't as overweight as Risa had thought. Tina isn't as tall. The nicotine girl isn't nearly as ugly.

A ramp leads down from the hold, and Risa must wait her turn in a long line of kids leaving their crates. Rumors are already buzzing. Risa tries to listen, and sort the fact from fiction.

"A buncha kids died."

"No way."

"I heard half the kids died."

"No way!"

"Look around you, moron! Does it look like half of us died?"

"Well, I just heard."

"It was just one crateful that died."

"Yeah! Someone says they freaked out and ate each other—you know, like the Donner party."

"No, they just suffocated."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause I saw them, man. Right in the crate next to mine. There were five guys in there instead of four, and they all suffocated."

Risa turns to the kid who said that. "Is that really true, or are you just making it up?"

Risa can tell by the unsettled look on his face that he's sincere. "I wouldn't joke about something like that."

Risa looks for Connor, but her view is limited to the few kids around her in line. She quickly does the math. There were about sixty kids. Five kids suffocated. One-in-twelve chance it was Connor. No, because the boy who saw into the dead crate said there were *guys* in there. There were only thirty guys in all. One-in-six chance it was Connor. Had he been one of the last ones in? Had he been shoved into an overpacked crate? She didn't know. She had been so flustered when they were rousted that morning, it was hard enough to keep track of herself, much less anyone else. *Please, God, let it not be Connor. Let it not be Connor.* Her last words to him had been angry ones. Even though he had saved her from Roland, she was furious at him. "Get out of here!" she had screamed. She couldn't bear the thought of his dying with those being her last words. She couldn't bear the thought of his dying, period.

She bangs her head on the low opening of the cargo hold on her way out.

"Watch your head," says one of the kids in charge.

"Yeah, thanks," says Risa. He smirks at her. This kid is also dressed in Army clothes, but he's too scrawny to be a military boeuf. "What's with the clothes?"

"Army surplus," he says. "Stolen clothes for stolen souls."

Outside the hold, the light of day is blinding, and the heat hits Risa like a furnace. The ramp beneath her slopes to the ground, and she has to stare at her feet, squinting to keep from stumbling. By the time she reaches the ground, her eyes have adjusted enough to take in their surroundings. All around them, *everywhere,* are airplanes, but there's no sign of an airport—just the planes, row after row, for as far as the

eye can see. Many are from airlines that no longer exist. She turns to look at the jet they just arrived on. It carries the logo of FedEx, but this craft is a sorry specimen. It seems about ready for the junkyard. *Or,* thinks Risa, *the graveyard . . .*

"This is nuts," one kid beside Risa grumbles. "It's not like this plane is invisible. They're going to know exactly where the plane has gone. We're going to be tracked here!"

"Don't you get it?" says Risa. "That jet was just decommissioned. That's how they do it. They wait for a decommissioned plane, then load us in as cargo. The plane was coming here anyway, so no one's going to miss it."

The jets rest on a barren hardpan of maroon earth. Distant red mountains poke up from the ground. They are somewhere in the Southwest.

There's a row of port-o-potties that already have anxious lines. The kids shepherding them count heads and try to maintain order in the disoriented group. One of them has a megaphone.

"Please remain under the wing if you're not using the latrine," he announces. "You made it this far, we don't want you to die of sunstroke."

Now that everyone's out of the plane, Risa desperately searches the crowd until she finally finds Connor. Thank God! She wants to go to him, but remembers that they've officially ended their fake romance. With two dozen kids between them, they briefly make eye contact, and exchange a secret nod. That nod says everything. It says that what happened between them yesterday is history; today, everything starts fresh.

Then she sees Roland there as well. He meets her eye and gives her a grin. That grin says things too. She looks away, wishing he had been in the suffocation crate. She considers feeling guilty for such a nasty wish, then realizes that she doesn't feel guilty for wishing it at all.

A golf cart comes rolling down the rows of airliners, kicking up a plume of red dust in its wake. The driver is a kid. The passenger is clearly military. Not military surplus, either—he's the real thing. Instead of green or khaki, he's in navy blue. He seems accustomed to

the heat—even in his hot uniform, he doesn't appear to sweat. The cart stops before the gathered hoard of juvenile refugees. The driver steps out first, and joins the four kids who had been leading them. The loud kid raises his megaphone. "May I have your attention! The Admiral is about to address you. If you know what's good for you, you'll listen."

The man steps out of the golf cart. The kid offers him the megaphone, but he waves it away. His voice needs no amplification. "I'd like to be the first to welcome you to the graveyard."

The Admiral is well into his sixties, and his face is full of scars. Only now does Risa realize that his uniform is one from the war. She can't recall whether these were the colors of the pro-life or pro-choice forces, but then, it doesn't really matter. Both sides lost.

"This will be your home until you turn eighteen or we procure a permanent sponsor willing to falsify your identification. Make no mistake about it: What we do here is highly illegal, but that does not mean we don't follow the rule of law. *My* law."

He pauses, making eye contact with as many kids as he can. Perhaps it's his goal to memorize each and every face before his speech is done. His eyes are sharp, his focus intense. Risa believes he can know each of them just by a single sustained glance. It's intimidating and reassuring at the same time. No one will fall between the cracks in the Admiral's world.

"All of you were marked for unwinding yet managed to escape, and, through the help of my many associates, you have found your way here. I don't care who you were. I don't care who you'll be when you leave here. All I care about is who you are while you're here—and while you're here, you will do what is expected of you."

A hand goes up in the crowd. It's Connor. Risa wishes it wasn't. The Admiral takes time to study Connor's face before saying, "Yes?"

"So . . . who are you, exactly?"

"My name is my business. Suffice it to say that I am a former admiral of the United States Navy." And then he grinned. "But now you could say I'm a fish out of water. The current political climate led to my resignation. The law said it was my job to look the other way,

but I did not. I will not." Then he turns to the crowd and says loudly, "No one gets unwound on my watch."

Cheers from all those assembled, including the khaki kids that were already a part of his little army. The Admiral gives a wide grin. His smile shows a set of perfectly straight, perfectly white teeth. It's a strange disconnect, because, while his teeth are sparkling, the rest of him seems worn down to the nub.

"We are a community here. You will learn the rules and you will follow them, or you will face the consequences, as in any society. This is not a democracy; it is a dictatorship. I am your dictator. This is a matter of necessity. It is the most effective way to keep you hidden, healthy, and whole." Then he gives that smile again. "I like to believe I am a benevolent dictator, but you can make that judgment for yourselves."

By now, his gaze has traveled over the entire crowd. All of them feel as though they have been scanned like groceries at a checkout counter. Scanned and processed.

"Tonight you will all sleep in the newcomers' quarters. Tomorrow your skills will be assessed, and you'll be assigned to your permanent squads. Congratulations. You've arrived!"

He takes a moment to let that last thought sink in, then he returns to his golf cart and is spirited off, with the same cloud of red dust billowing behind him.

"Is there still time to get back into the crate?" some wiseguy says. A bunch of kids laugh.

"All right, listen up," yells the megaphone kid. "We're going to walk you to the supply jet, where you'll get clothes, rations, and everything else you'll need." They are quick to find out that the megaphone kid has earned the nickname "Amp." As for the Admiral's driver, he's been stuck with "Jeeves."

"It's a long walk," Amp says. "If anyone can't make it, let us know. Anyone who needs water now, raise your hand."

Nearly every hand goes up.

"All right, line up here."

Risa lines up along with the rest of them. There's buzzing and whispering from the line of kids, but it's nowhere near as desperate as it had been in the weeks past. Now, it's more like the buzz of kids in a school lunch line.

As they're led off to be clothed and fed, the jet that brought them here is towed to its final resting place in the massive junkyard. Only now does Risa take a deep breath and release it, along with a month's worth of tension. Only now does she allow herself the wonderful luxury of hope.

OceanofPDF.com

29 · Lev

More than a thousand miles away, Lev is about to arrive as well. The destination, however, is not his own: It's Cyrus Finch's. Joplin, Missouri. "Home of the Joplin High Eagles—reigning state champions in girls' basketball," CyFi says.

"You know a lot about the place."

"I don't know anything about it," CyFi grumbles. "*He* knows. Or *knew*. Or whatever."

Their journey has gotten no easier. Sure, they have money now, thanks to Lev's "deal" at that pawnshop, but the money's only good for buying food. It can't get them train tickets, or even bus tickets, because there's nothing more suspicious than underage kids paying their own fare.

For all intents and purposes, things between Lev and CyFi are the same, with one major, unspoken exception. CyFi might still be playing the role of leader, but it's Lev who is now in charge. There's a guilty pleasure in knowing that CyFi would fall apart if Lev weren't there to hold him together.

With Joplin only twenty miles away, Cy's twitching gets bad enough that even walking is difficult for him. It's more than just twitching now—it's a shuddering that wracks his body like a seizure, leaving him shivering. Lev offers him his jacket, but Cy just swats him away. "I ain't cold! It's not about bein' cold! It's about being wrong. It's about there being oil and water in this brain of mine."

Exactly what Cy must do when he gets to Joplin is a mystery to Lev—and now he realizes that Cy doesn't know either. Whatever this kid—or this *bit* of kid—in his head is compelling him to do, it's completely beyond Cy's understanding. Lev can only hope that it's something purposeful, and not something destructive . . . although Lev can't help but suspect that whatever the kid wants, it's bad. Really bad.

"Why are you still with me, Fry?" CyFi asks after one of his body-shaking seizures. "Any sane dude woulda taken off days ago."

"Who says I'm sane?"

"Oh, you're sane, Fry. You're so sane, you scare me. You're so sane, it's *in*sane."

Lev thinks for a while. He wants to give Cyrus a real answer, not just something that chases away the question. "I'm staying," Lev says slowly, "because someone has to witness what happens in Joplin. Someone's got to understand why you did it. Whatever it is."

"Yeah," says CyFi. "I need a witness. That's it."

"You're like a salmon swimming upstream," Lev offers. "It's inside you to do it. And it's inside me to help you get there."

"Salmon." Cy looks thoughtful. "I once saw this poster about a salmon. It was jumping up this waterfall, see? But there was a bear at the top, and the fish, it was jumping right into the bear's mouth. The caption beneath—it was supposed to be funny—said, 'The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly.'"

"There's no bear in Joplin," Lev tells him. He doesn't try to cheer Cy up with any more analogies, because Cy's so smart, he can find a way to make anything sound bad. One hundred and thirty IQ points all focused on cooking up doom. Lev can't hope to compete with that.

The days go by, mile by mile, town by town, until the afternoon they pass a sign that says, NOW ENTERING JOPLIN. POPULATION 45,504.

OceanofPDF.com

30 · Cy-Ty

There is no peace in CyFi's his head. The Fry doesn't know how bad it is. The Fry doesn't know how the feelings crash over him like storm-driven waves pounding a failing seawall. The wall is going to collapse soon, and when it does, Cy will lose it. He'll lose everything. His mind will spill out of his ears and down the drains of the streets of Joplin. He knows it.

Then he sees the sign. NOW ENTERING JOPLIN. His heart is his own, but it pounds in his chest, threatening to burst—and wouldn't that be a fine thing? They'd rush him to a hospital, give him someone else's ticker, and he'd have *that* kid to deal with too.

This boy in the corner of his head doesn't talk to him in words. He *feels*. He *emotes*. He doesn't understand that he's only a part of another kid. It's like how in a dream you know some things, and other things you should know, but you don't. This kid—he knows where he is, but he doesn't know he's not all here. He doesn't know he's part of someone else now. He keeps looking for things in Cyrus's head that just aren't there. Memories. Connections. He keeps looking for words, but Cyrus's brain codes words differently. And so the kid hurls out anger. Terror. Grief. Waves pounding the wall, and beneath it all, there's a current tugging Cy forward. Something must be done here. Only the kid knows what it is.

"Would it help to have a map?" asks the Fry. The question gets Cy mad. "Map won't help me," he says. "I need to see stuff. I need to *be* places. A map is just a map. It ain't *being* there."

They stand at a corner on the outskirts of Joplin. It's like divining for water. Nothing looks familiar. "He doesn't know this place," Cy says. "Let's try another street."

Block after block, intersection after intersection, it's the same. Nothing. Joplin is a small town, but not so small that a person could know all of it. Then, at last they get to a main street. There are shops

and restaurants up and down the road. It's just like any other town this size, but—

"Wait!"

"What is it?"

"He knows this street," says Cy. "There! That ice cream shop. I can taste pumpkin ice cream. I hate pumpkin ice cream."

"I'll bet *he* didn't."

Cyrus nods. "It was his favorite. The loser." He points a finger at the ice cream shop and slowly swings his arm to the left. "He comes walking from that direction. . . ." He swings his arm to the right. "And when he's done, he goes that way."

"So, do we track where he comes from, or where he goes?"

Cy chooses to go left but finds himself at Joplin High, home of the Eagles. He gets an image of a sword, and instantly knows. "Fencing. The kid was on the fencing team here."

"Swords are shiny," the Fry notes. Cy would throw him a dirty look if he weren't right on target. Swords are, indeed, shiny. He wonders if the kid ever stole swords, and realizes that, yes, he probably did. Stealing the swords of opposing teams is a time-honored tradition of fencing.

"This way," says the Fry, taking the lead. "He must have gone from school, to the ice cream shop, to home. Home is where we're going, right?"

The answer comes to Cy as an urge deep in his brain that shoots straight to his gut. Salmon? More like a swordfish twisting on a line, and that line is pulling him relentlessly toward . . . "Home," says Cy. "Right."

It's twilight now. Kids are out in the street; half the cars have headlights on. As far as anyone knows, they're just two neighborhood kids, headed wherever neighborhood kids go. No one seems to notice them. But there's a police car a block away. It was parked, but now it begins moving.

They pass the ice cream parlor, and as they do, Cyrus can feel the change inside him. It's in his walk, and in the way he holds himself. It's in all the tension points of his face: They're changing. His

eyebrows lower, his jaw opens slightly. *I'm not myself. That other kid is taking over.* Should Cy let it happen, or should he fight it? But he knows it's already past the point of fighting. The only way to finish this is to let it happen.

"Cy," says the kid next to him.

Cy looks at him, and although part of him knows it's just Lev, another part of him panics. He instantly knows why. He closes his eyes for a moment and tries to convince the kid in his head that the Fry is a friend, not a threat. The kid seems to get it, and his panic drops a notch.

Cy reaches a corner and turns left like he's done it a hundred times. The rest of him shudders as he tries to keep up with his determined temporal lobe. Now a feeling comes on him. Nervous, annoyed. He knows he must find a way to translate it into words.

"I'm gonna be late. They're gonna be so mad. They're always so mad."

"Late for what?"

"Dinner. They gotta eat it right on time, or I get hell for it. They could eat it without me, but they won't. They don't. They just stew. And the food goes cold. And it's my fault, my fault, always my fault. So I gotta sit there and they ask me how was my day? Fine. What did I learn? Nothing. What did I do wrong this time? Everything." It's not his voice. It's his vocal chords, but it's not his voice coming out of them. Same tones, but different inflections. A different accent. Like the way he might have talked if he came from Joplin, home of the Eagles.

As they turn another corner, Cy catches sight of that cop car again. It's behind them, following slowly. No mistake about it: It's following. And that's not all. There's another police car up ahead, but that one's just waiting in front of a house. His house. *My house.* Cy is the salmon after all, and that police car is the bear. But even so, he can't stop. He's got to get to that house or die trying.

As he nears the front walk, two men get out of a familiar Toyota parked across the street. It's the dads. They look at him, relief in their

faces, but also pain. So they knew where he was coming. They must have known all along.

"Cyrus," one of them calls. He wants to run to them. He wants them to just take him home, but he stops himself. He can't go home. Not yet. They both stride toward him, getting in his path, but smart enough not to get in his face.

"I gotta do this," he says in a voice he knows isn't his at all.

That's when the police leap from their cars and grab him. They're too strong for him to fight them off, so he looks at the dads. "I gotta do this," he says again. "Don't be the bear."

They look at each other, not understanding what he means—but then, maybe they do, because they step aside and say to the cops, "Let him go."

"This is Lev," Cyrus says, amazed that the Fry is willing to risk his own safety to stand by Cy now. "Nobody bothers him, either." The dads take a brief moment to acknowledge the Fry, but quickly return their attention to Cyrus.

The cops frisk Cy to make sure he has no weapon, and, satisfied, they let him go on toward the house. But there *is* a weapon. It's something sharp and heavy. Right now it's just in a corner of his mind, but in a few moments it won't be. And now Cy's scared, but he can't stop.

There's a police officer at the front door talking in hushed tones to a man and a woman standing at the threshold. They glance nervously at Cy.

The part of Cy that isn't Cy knows this middle-aged couple so well, he's hit by a lightning bolt of emotions so violent he feels like he'll incinerate.

As he walks toward the door, the flagstone path seems to undulate beneath his feet like a fun-house floor. Then finally he's standing before them. The couple look scared—horrified. Part of him is happy at that, part of him sad, and part of him wishes he could be anyplace else in the world, but he no longer knows which part is which.

He opens his mouth to speak, trying to translate the feelings into words.

"Give it!" he demands. "Give it to me, Mom. Give it to me, Dad."

The woman covers her mouth and turns away. She presses out tears like she's a sponge in a fist.

"Tyler?" says the man. "Tyler, is that you?"

It's the first time Cyrus has a name to go with that part of him. *Tyler. Yes. I'm Cyrus, but I'm also Tyler. I'm Cy-Ty.*

"Hurry!" Cy-Ty says. "Give it to me—I need it now!"

"What? Tyler," says the woman through her tears, "What do you want from us?"

Cy-Ty tries to say it, but he can't get the word. He can't even get the image straight. It's a thing. A weapon. Still the image won't come, but the action does. He's miming something. He leans forward, puts one arm in front of the other. He's holding something long, angling it down. He thrusts both arms lower. And now he knows it's not a weapon he seeks, it's a tool. Because he understands the action he's miming. He's digging.

"Shovel!" he says with a breath of relief. "I need the shovel."

The man and woman look at each other. The policeman beside them nods, and the man says, "It's out in the shed."

Cy-Ty makes a beeline through the house and out the back door with everyone following behind him: the couple, the cops, the dads, and the Fry. He heads straight for the shed, grabs the shovel—he knew exactly where it was—and heads toward a corner of the yard, where some twigs stick out of the ground.

The twigs have been tied to form lopsided crosses.

Cy-Ty knows this corner of the yard. He feels this place in his gut. This is where he buried his pets. He doesn't know their names, or even what kind of animals they were, but he suspects one of them was an Irish setter. He gets images of what happened to each of them. One met up with a pack of wild dogs. Another with a bus. The third, old age. He takes the shovel and thrusts it into the ground, but not near any of their graves. He'd never disturb them. Never. Instead, he presses his shovel into the soft earth two yards behind the graves.

He grunts with every thrust of the shovel, hurling the dirt wildly to the side. Then, at just about two feet down, the shovel hits something

with a dull thud. He drops to all fours and begins scooping out the earth with his hands.

With the dirt cleared away, he reaches in, grabs a handle, and tugs, tugs, tugs until it comes up. He's holding a briefcase that's waterlogged and covered with mud. He puts it on the ground, flicks open the latches, and opens it.

The moment he sees what's inside, Cy-Ty's entire brain seizes. He's frozen in a total system lockup. He can't move, can't think. Because it's all so bright, so shiny in the slanted red rays of the sun. There are so many pretty things to look at, he can't move. But he must move. He must finish this.

He digs both of his hands into the jewelry-filled briefcase, feeling the fine gold chains slide over his hands, hearing the rattle of metal against metal. There are diamonds and rubies, zircons and plastic. The priceless and the worthless, all mixed in together. He doesn't remember where or when he stole any of it, he only knows that he did. He stole it, hoarded it, and hid it. Put it in its own little grave, to dig up when he needed it. But if he can give it back, then maybe . . .

With hands tangled in gold chains more binding than the handcuffs on the policemen's belts, he stumbles toward the man and woman. Bits and pieces, rings and pins fall from the tangled bundle into the brush of the yard. They slip through his fingers, but still he holds on to what he can until he's there in front of the man and woman, who now hold each other as if cowering in the path of a tornado. Then he falls to his knees, drops the bundle of shiny things at their feet, and, rocking back and forth, makes a desperate plea.

"Please," he says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"Please," he says, "Take it. I don't need it. I don't want it."

"Please," he says. "Do anything. *But don't unwind me.*"

And all at once Cy realizes that Tyler doesn't know. The part of that boy which comprehends time and place isn't here, and never will be. Tyler can't understand that he's already gone, and nothing Cy can do will ever make him understand. So he goes on wailing.

"Please don't unwind me. I'll do anything. Please don't unwind me. *Pleeeeeeeease . . .*"

Then, behind him, he hears a voice.

OceanofPDF.com

31 · Lev

"Tell him what he needs to hear!" Lev says. He stands there with such wrath in him he feels the earth itself will split from his anger. He told Cy he'd witness this. But he can't witness it and not take action.

Tyler's parents still huddle together, comforting each other instead of comforting Cy. It makes Lev even more furious.

"TELL HIM YOU WON'T UNWIND HIM!" he screams.

The man and woman just look at him like stupid rabbits. So he grabs the shovel from the ground and swings it back over his shoulder like a baseball bat. "TELL HIM YOU WON'T UNWIND HIM, OR I SWEAR I'LL BASH YOUR WORTHLESS HEADS IN!" He's never spoken like this to anyone. He's never threatened anyone. And he knows it's not just a threat—he'll do it. Today, he'll hit a grand slam if he has to.

The cops reach for their holsters and pull out their guns, but Lev doesn't care.

"Drop the shovel!" one of them yells. His gun is trained at Lev's chest, but Lev won't drop it. *Let him shoot. If he does, I'll still get in one good swing at Tyler's parents before I go down. I might die, but at least I'll take one of them with me.* In his whole life, he's never felt like this before. He's never felt this close to exploding.

"TELL HIM! TELL HIM NOW!"

Everything freezes in the stand-off: the cops and their guns, Lev and his shovel. Then finally the man and woman end it. They look down at the boy rocking back and forth, sobbing over the random pieces of tangled jewelry he's spread at their feet.

"We won't unwind you, Tyler."

"PROMISE HIM!"

"We won't unwind you, Tyler. We promise. We promise."

Cy's shoulders relax, and although he still cries, they're no longer sobs of desperation. They're sobs of relief.

"Thank you," Cy says. "Thank you . . ."

Lev drops the shovel, the cops lower their guns, and the tearful couple escape toward the safety of their home. Cyrus's dads are there to fill the void. They help Cyrus up and hold him tight.

"It's all right, Cyrus. Everything's going to be okay."

And through his sobs, Cy says, "I know. It's all good now. It's all good."

That's when Lev takes off. He knows he's the only variable in this equation left to resolve, and in a moment the cops are going to realize that. So he backs into the shadows while the officers are still distracted by the scurrying couple, and the crying kid, and the two dads, and the shiny things on the ground. Then, once he's in the shadows, he turns and runs. In a few moments they'll know he's gone, but a few moments is all he needs. Because he's fast. He's always been fast. He's through the bushes, into the next yard, and onto another street in ten seconds.

The look on Cy's face as he dropped the jewelry at the feet of those horrible, horrible people, and the way they acted, as if *they* were the ones being victimized—these things will stay with Lev for the rest of his life. He knows he's been changed by this moment, transformed in some deep and frightening way. Wherever his journey now takes him, it doesn't matter, because he has already arrived there in his heart. He's become like that briefcase in the ground—full of gems yet void of light, so nothing sparkles, nothing shines.

The last bit of daylight is gone from the sky now; the only color left is dark blue fading to black. The streetlights have not yet come on, so Lev dodges through endless shades of pitch. The better to run. The better to hide. The better to lose himself now that darkness is his friend.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Five

Graveyard

[Southwest Arizona] serves as an ideal graveyard for airplanes. It has a dry, clear and virtually smog-free climate that helps minimize corrosion. It has an alkaline soil so firm that airplanes can be towed and parked on the surface without sinking. . . .

An airplane graveyard is not just a fence around airplane carcasses and piles of scrap metal. Rather, many millions of dollars' worth of surplus parts are salvaged to keep active aircraft flying. . . .

—Joe Zentner, *"Airplane Graveyards,"* *desertusa.com*

OceanofPDF.com

32 · The Admiral

The blazing sun bakes the Arizona hardpan by day, and the temperature plunges at night. More than four thousand planes from every era of aviation history shine in the heat of that sun. From cruising altitude, the rows of planes look like crop lines, a harvest of abandoned technology.

#1) YOU ARRIVED HERE BY NECESSITY. YOU STAY HERE BY CHOICE.

From way up there you can't see that some of those grounded jets are occupied. Thirty-three, to be exact. Spy satellites can catch the activity, but catching it and noticing it are two different things. CIA data analysts have far more pressing things to look for than a band of refugee Unwinds. This is what the Admiral's counting on—but just in case, the rules in the Graveyard are strict. All activity takes place in the fuselage or under the wings, unless it's absolutely necessary to go out into the open. The heat helps enforce the edict.

#2) SURVIVING HAS EARNED YOU THE RIGHT TO BE RESPECTED.

The Admiral doesn't exactly own the Graveyard, but his management is undisputed, and he answers to no one but himself. A combination of business sense, favors owed, and a military willing to do anything to get rid of him are what made such a sweet deal possible.

#3) MY WAY IS THE ONLY WAY.

The Graveyard is a thriving business. The Admiral buys decommissioned airplanes and sells the parts, or even resells them whole. Most business is done online; the Admiral is able to acquire about one retired jet a month. Of course, each one arrives loaded with a secret cargo of Unwinds. That's the real business of the Graveyard, and business has been good.

#4) YOUR LIFE IS MY GIFT TO YOU. TREAT IT LIKE ONE.

Buyers do, on occasion, come to inspect or to pick up merchandise, but there's always plenty of warning. From the time they enter the

gate, it's five miles to the yard itself. It gives the kids more than enough time to disappear like gremlins into the machinery. These types of business-related visitors come only about once a week. There are people who wonder what the Admiral does with all the rest of his time. He tells them he's building a wildlife preserve.

#5) YOU ARE BETTER THAN THOSE WHO WOULD UNWIND YOU. RISE TO THE OCCASION.

There are only three adults in the Admiral's employ; two office workers stationed in a trailer far from the Unwinds, and a helicopter pilot. The pilot goes by the name of Cleaver, and he has two jobs. The first is to tour important buyers around the lot in style. The second is to take the Admiral on trips around the Graveyard once a week. Cleaver is the only employee who knows about the hoard of Unwinds sequestered in the far reaches of the lot. He knows, but he's paid more than enough to keep quiet; and besides, the Admiral trusts Cleaver implicitly. One must trust one's personal pilot.

#6) EVERYONE IN THE GRAVEYARD CONTRIBUTES. NO EXCEPTIONS.

The real work in the yard is done by the Unwinds. There are whole teams specially designated to strip the jets, sort parts, and get them ready for sale. It's just like any other junkyard, but on a larger scale. Not all the jets get stripped. Some remain untouched, if the Admiral thinks he can resell them whole. Some are retooled as living quarters for the kids who are, both literally and figuratively, under his wing.

#7) TEENAGE REBELLION IS FOR SUBURBAN SCHOOLCHILDREN. GET OVER IT.

The kids are grouped in teams best suited for their jobs, their ages, and their personal needs. A lifetime of experience molding military boeufs into a coherent fighting force has prepared the Admiral for creating a functional society out of angry, troubled kids.

#8) HORMONES WILL NOT RULE MY DESERT.

Girls are never grouped with boys.

#9) AT EIGHTEEN YOU CEASE TO BE MY CONCERN.

The Admiral has a list of his ten supreme rules, posted in each and every plane where kids live and work. The kids call them "The Ten

Demandments." He doesn't care what they call them, as long as each and every one of them knows the list by heart.

#10) MAKE SOMETHING OF YOURSELF. THIS IS AN ORDER.

It's a challenge keeping almost four hundred kids healthy, hidden, and whole. But the Admiral has never walked away from a challenge. And his motivation for doing this, like his name, is something he prefers to keep to himself.

OceanofPDF.com

33 · Risa

For Risa, the first days in the Graveyard are harsh and seem to last forever. Her residency begins with an exercise in humility.

Every new arrival is required to face a tribunal: three seventeen-year-olds sitting behind a desk in the gutted shell of a wide-bodied jet. Two boys and a girl. These three, together with Amp and Jeeves, who Risa met when she first stepped off the plane, make up the elite group of five everyone calls "the Goldens." They're the Admiral's five most trusted kids—and therefore the ones in charge.

By the time they get to Risa, they've already processed forty kids.

"Tell us about yourself," says the boy on the right. Starboard Boy, she calls him, since, after all, they're in a vessel. "What do you know, and what can you do?"

The last tribunal Risa faced was back at StaHo, when she was sentenced to be unwound. She can tell these three are bored and don't care what she says, just as long as they can get on to the next one. She finds herself hating them, just as she hated the headmaster that day he tried to explain why her membership in the human race had been revoked.

The girl, who sits in the middle, must read her feelings, because she smiles and says, "Don't worry, this isn't a test—we just want to help you find where you'll fit in here." It's an odd thing to say, since not fitting in is every Unwind's problem.

Risa takes a deep breath. "I was a music student at StaHo," she says, then immediately regrets telling them she's from a state home. Even among Unwinds there's prejudice and pecking orders. Sure enough, Starboard leans back, crossing his arms in clear disapproval, but the port-side boy says: "I'm a Ward too. Florida StaHo 18."

"Ohio 23."

"What instrument do you play?" the girl asks.

"Classical piano."

“Sorry,” says Starboard. “We’ve got enough musicians, and none of the planes came with a piano.”

“‘Survival has earned me the right to be respected,’” Risa says. “Isn’t that one of the Admiral’s rules? I don’t think he’d like your attitude.”

Starboard squirms. “Can we just get on with this?”

The girl offers an apologetic grin. “As much as I hate to admit it, in the here and now, there are other things we need before a virtuoso. What else can you do?”

“Just give me a job and I’ll do it,” Risa says, trying to get this over with. “That’s what you’re going to do anyway, right?”

“Well, they always need help in the galley,” says Starboard. “Especially after meals.”

The girl gives Risa a long, pleading look, perhaps hoping that Risa will come up with something better for herself, but all Risa says is “Fine. Dishwasher. Am I done here?”

She turns to leave, doing her best to douse her disgust. The next kid comes in as she’s heading out. He looks awful. His nose is swollen and purple. His shirt is caked with dried blood, and both his nostrils have started bleeding fresh.

“What happened to you?”

He looks at her, sees who it is, and says, “Your boyfriend—that’s what happened to me. And he’s gonna pay.”

Risa could ask him a dozen questions about that, but the kid’s bleeding all over his shirt, and the first priority is to stop it. He tips his head back.

“No,” Risa tells him. “Lean forward, otherwise you’ll gag on your own blood.”

The kid listens. The tribunal of three come out from behind their desk to see what they can do, but Risa has it under control.

“Pinch it like this,” she tells him. “You need to be patient with this kind of thing.” She shows the kid exactly how to pinch his nose to stem the flow of blood. Then, once the bleeding stops, Port-side comes over to her and says, “Nice work.”

She’s immediately promoted from dishwasher to medic. Funny, but it’s indirectly Connor’s doing, since he’s the one who broke that kid’s

nose in the first place.

As for the kid with the bloody nose, he gets assigned to dish washing.

* * *

The first few days, actually trying to act like a medic without any real training is terrifying. There are other kids in the medical jet who seem to know a lot more, but she quickly comes to realize they were thrown into this just like she was, when they first arrived.

"You'll do fine. You're a natural," the senior medic, who is all of seventeen, tells her. He's right. Once she gets used to the idea, handling first aid, standard illnesses, and even suturing simple wounds becomes as familiar to her as playing the piano. The days begin to pass quickly, and before she realizes it, she's been there a month. Each day that goes by adds to her sense of security. The Admiral was an odd bird, but he'd done something no one else had been able to do for her since she'd left StaHo. He'd given her back her right to exist.

OceanofPDF.com

34 · Connor

Like Risa, Connor finds his niche by accident. Connor never considered himself mechanically capable, but there are few things he can stand less than a bunch of morons standing around looking at something that doesn't work and wondering who's going to fix it. During that first week, while Risa's off learning how to be an exceptionally good fake doctor, Connor decides to figure out the workings of a fried air-conditioning unit, then find replacement parts from one of the junk piles and get it working again.

He soon comes to realize it's the same way with every other broken thing he comes across. Sure, it began with trial and error, but the errors become fewer and fewer as the days go by. There are plenty of other kids who claim to be mechanics, and are really good at explaining why things won't work. Connor, on the other hand, actually fixes them.

It quickly gets him reassigned from trash duty to the repair crew, and since there are endless things to repair, it keeps his mind off of other things . . . such as how little he gets to see Risa in the Admiral's tightly structured world . . . and how quickly Roland is advancing through the social ranks of the place.

Roland has managed to get himself one of the best assignments in the Graveyard. By working the angles and applying plenty of flattery, he's been taken on as the pilot's assistant. Mostly, he just keeps the helicopter cleaned and fueled, but the assignment reeks of an apprenticeship.

"He's teaching me how to fly it," he overhears Roland tell a bunch of other kids one day. Connor shudders to think of Roland behind the controls of a helicopter, but many kids are impressed by Roland. His age gives him seniority, and his manipulations gain him either fear or respect from a surprising number of others. Roland draws his negative energy from the kids around him, and there are a lot of kids here for him to draw from.

Social manipulation is not one of Connor's strengths. Even among his own team, he's a bit of a mystery. Kids know not to tread on him, because he has a low tolerance for irritation and idiocy. But there's no one they'd rather have on their side than Connor.

"People like you because you've got integrity," Hayden tells him. "Even when you're being an ass."

Connor has to laugh at that. Him? Integrity? There have been plenty of people in Connor's life who would think differently. But on the other hand, he's changing. He's been getting into fewer fights. Maybe it's because there's more room to breathe here than in the warehouse. Or maybe he's been working out his brain enough for it to successfully muscle his impulses into line. A lot of that has to do with Risa, because every time he forces himself to think before acting, it's her voice in his head telling him to slow down. He wants to tell her, but she's always so busy in the medical jet—and you don't just go to somebody and say, "I'm a better person because you're in my head."

She's also still in Roland's head, and that worries Connor. At first Risa had been a tool to provoke Connor into a fight, but now Roland sees her as a prize. Now, instead of using brute strength against her he tries to charm her at every turn.

"You're not actually falling for him, are you?" he asks her one day, on one of the rare occasions he can get her alone.

"I'll pretend you didn't just ask that," she tells him in disgust. But Connor has reasons to wonder.

"On that first night here, he offered you his blanket, and you accepted it," he points out.

"Only because I knew it would make him cold."

"And when he offers you his food, you take it."

"Because it means he goes hungry."

It's coolly logical. Connor finds it amazing that she can put her emotions aside and be as calculating as Roland, beating him at his own game. Another reason for Connor to admire her.

* * *

"Work call!"

It happens about once a week beneath the meeting canopy—the only structure in the entire graveyard that isn't part of a plane, and the only place large enough to gather all 423 kids. Work call. A chance to get out into the real world. A chance to have a life. Sort of.

The Admiral never attends, but there are video feeds from the meeting canopy, just as there are feeds all over the yard, so everyone knows he's watching. Whether or not every camera is constantly monitored, no one knows, but the potential for being seen is always there. Connor did not care for the Admiral the first day he met him. The sight of all those video cameras shortly thereafter made Connor like him even less. It seems each day there's something to add to his general feeling of disgust with the man.

Amp leads the work call meeting with his megaphone and clipboard. "A man in Oregon needs a team of five to clear cut a few acres of forest," Amp announces. "You'll be given room and board, and taught to use the tools of the trade. The job should take a few months, and at the end you'll get new identities. Eighteen-year-old identities."

Amp doesn't let them know the salary, because there is none. The Admiral gets paid, though. He gets paid a purchase price.

"Any takers?"

There are always takers. Sure enough, more than a dozen hands go up. Sixteen-year-olds, mostly. Seventeens are too close to eighteen to make it worth their while, and younger kids are too intimidated by the prospect.

"Report to the Admiral after this meeting. He'll make the final decision as to who goes."

Work call infuriates Connor. He never puts his hand up, even if it's something he might actually want to do. "The Admiral's using us," he says to the kids around him. "Don't you see that?"

Most of the kids just shrug, but Hayden's there, and he never misses an opportunity to add his peculiar wisdom to a situation. "I'd rather be used whole than in pieces," Hayden says.

Amp looks at his clipboard and holds up the megaphone again. "Housecleaning services," he says. "Three are needed, female

preferred. No false IDs, but the location is secure and remote—which means you'll be safe from the Juvey-cops until you turn eighteen."

Connor won't even look. "Please tell me no one raised their hand."

"About six girls—all seventeen years old, it looks like," says Hayden. "I guess no one wants to be a house-girl for more than a year."

"This place isn't a refuge, it's a slave market. Why doesn't anyone see that?"

"Who says they don't see it? It's just that unwinding makes slavery look good. It's always the lesser of two evils."

"I don't see why there have to be any evils at all."

As the meeting breaks up, Connor feels a hand on his shoulder. He thinks it must be a friend, but it's not. It's Roland. It's such a surprise, it takes Connor a moment before he reacts. He shakes Roland's hand off. "Something you want?"

"Just to talk."

"Don't you have a helicopter to wash?"

Roland smiles at that. "Less washing, more flying. Cleaver made me his unofficial copilot."

"Cleaver must have a death wish." Connor doesn't know who he's more disgusted with: Roland, or the pilot for being suckered in by him.

Roland looks around at the thinning crowd. "The Admiral's got some racket going here, doesn't he?" he says. "Most of the losers here don't care. But it bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Your point?"

"Just that you're not the only one who thinks the Admiral needs some . . . retraining."

Connor doesn't like where this is going. "What I think of the Admiral is my business."

"Of course it is. Have you seen his teeth, by the way?"

"What about them?"

"Pretty obvious that they're not his. I hear he keeps a picture of the kid he got them from in his office. An Unwind like us, who, thanks to him, never made it to eighteen. Makes you wonder how much more of him comes from us. Makes you wonder if there's anything left of the original Admiral at all."

This is too much information to process here and now—and considering the source, Connor doesn't want to process it at all. But he knows he will.

"Roland, let me make this as clear to you as I can. I don't trust you. I don't like you. I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"I can't stand you, either," Roland says, then he points to the Admiral's jet. "But right now, we've got the same enemy."

Roland strolls off before anyone else can take notice of their conversation, leaving Connor with a heaviness in his stomach. The very idea that he and Roland could in any way be on the same side makes him feel like he swallowed something rancid.

* * *

For a week the seed that Roland planted in Connor's brain grows. It's fertile ground, because Connor already distrusted the Admiral. Now, every time he sees the man, Connor notices something. His teeth *are* perfect. They're not the teeth of an aging war veteran. The way he looks at people—looking into their eyes—it's as if he were sizing those eyes up, looking for a pair that might suit him. And those kids that disappear on work calls—since they never come back, who's to know where they really go? Who's to say they don't all get sent off to be unwound? The Admiral says his goal is to save Unwinds, but what if he's got an entirely different agenda? These thoughts keep Connor awake at night, but he won't share them with anyone, because once he does, it aligns him with Roland. And that's an alliance he never wants to make.

* * *

During their fourth week in the Graveyard, while Connor is still building his case against the Admiral in his own mind, a plane arrives. It's the first one since the old FedEx jet that brought them here, and like that jet, this one is packed full of live cargo. While the five Goldens march the new arrivals from their jet, Connor works on a faulty generator. He watches them with mild interest as they pass,

wondering if any of them would be more mechanically skilled than him and bump him into a less enviable position.

Then, toward the back of the line of kids is a face he thinks he recognizes. Someone from home? No. Someone else. All at once it comes to him who this is. It's the boy he was sure had been unwound weeks ago. It's the kid he kidnapped for his own good. It's Lev!

Connor drops his wrench and runs toward him, but gains control before he gets there, burying his mixed flood of feelings beneath a calm saunter. This is the kid who betrayed him. This is the kid he once swore he'd never forgive. And yet the thought of him unwound had been too much to bear. But Lev hasn't been unwound—he's right here, marching off to the supply jet. Connor is thrilled. Connor is furious.

Lev doesn't see him yet—and that's fine, because it gives Connor some time to take in what he sees. This is no longer the clean-cut tithe he pulled out of his parents' car more than two months before. This kid has long, unkempt hair and a hardened look about him. This kid isn't in tithing whites but wears torn jeans and a dirty red T-shirt. Connor wants to let him pass, just so he can have time to process this new image, but Lev sees him, and gives him a grin right away. This is also different—because during that brief time they knew each other, Lev had never been pleased by Connor's presence.

Lev steps toward him.

"Stay in line!" orders Amp. "The supply jet's this way."

But Connor waves Amp off. "It's okay—I know this one."

Amp reluctantly gives in. "Make sure he gets to the supply jet." Then he returns to herding the others.

"So, how are things?" says Lev. Just like that. How are things. You'd think they were buds back from summer vacation.

Connor knows what he has to do. It's the only thing that will ever make things right between him and Lev. Once again, it's instinctive action without time for thought. Instinctive, not irrational. Impassioned, but not impulsive. Connor has come to know the difference.

He hauls off and punches Lev in the eye. Not hard enough to knock him down, but hard enough to snap his head halfway around and give him a nasty shiner. Before Lev can react, Connor says, "*That's* for what you did to us." Then, before Lev can respond, he does something else sudden and unexpected. He pulls Lev toward him and hugs him tightly—the way he hugged his own little brother last year when he took first place in the district pentathlon. "I'm really, *really* glad you're alive, Lev."

"Yeah. Me, too."

He lets Lev go before it starts feeling awkward, and when he does, he can see Lev's eye is already beginning to swell. And an idea occurs to him. "C'mon—I'll take you over to the medical jet. I know someone who'll take care of that eye."

* * *

It isn't until later that night that Connor gets an inkling of how much Lev has truly changed. Connor is shaken awake sometime during the night. He opens his eyes to a flashlight shining in his face, so close the light hurts.

"Hey! What is this?"

"Shhh," says a voice behind the flashlight. "It's Lev."

Lev should have been in the newcomers' jet—that's where all the kids go until they get sorted into their teams. There are strict orders that no one is to be out at night. Apparently Lev is no longer a boy bound by rules.

"What are you doing here?" Connor says. "Do you know the trouble you could be in?" He still can't see Lev's face behind that flashlight.

"You hit me this afternoon," says Lev.

"I hit you because I owed that to you."

"I know. I deserved it, and so it's okay," says Lev. "But don't you *ever* hit me again, or you'll regret it."

Although Connor has no intention of ever punching Lev out again, he does not respond well to ultimatums.

"I'll hit you," says Connor, "if you deserve it."

Silence from behind the flashlight. Then Lev says, "Fair enough. But you better make sure that I do."

The light goes off. Lev leaves, but Connor can't sleep. Every Unwind has a story you don't want to know. He supposes that Lev now has his.

* * *

The Admiral calls for Connor two days later. Apparently he has something in need of repair. His residence is an old 747 that was used as Air Force One years before any of the kids here were born. The engines had been removed and the presidential seal painted over, but you could still see a shadow of the emblem beneath the paint.

Connor climbs the stairs with a bag of tools, hoping that whatever it is, he can get in and out quickly. Like everyone else, he has a morbid curiosity about the man, and he wonders what an old presidential jet looks like on the inside. But being under the Admiral's scrutiny scares the hell out of him.

He steps through the hatch to find a couple of kids tidying up. They're younger kids that Connor doesn't know; he thought the Goldens might be in here, but they're nowhere to be seen. As for the jet, it's not nearly as luxurious as Connor had expected. The leather seats have tears, the carpet is almost worn through. It looks more like an old motor home than Air Force One.

"Where's the Admiral?"

The Admiral steps out from the deeper recesses of the jet. Although Connor's eyes are still adjusting to the light, he can see the Admiral is holding a weapon. "Connor! I'm glad you could make it." Connor winces at the sight of the gun—and at the realization the Admiral knows him by name.

"What do you need that for?" Connor asks, pointing at the gun.

"Just cleaning it," says the Admiral. Connor wonders why he would still have a clip in a gun he was cleaning, but decides it's best not to ask. The Admiral puts the gun into a drawer and locks it. Then he sends the two kids off and seals the hatch behind them. This is exactly the kind of situation Connor feared most, and he can feel a rush of

adrenaline begin to tingle in his fingers and toes. His awareness becomes heightened.

"You need me to fix something sir?"

"Yes, I do. My coffeemaker."

"Why don't you just take one from the other planes?"

"Because," says the Admiral calmly, "I prefer to have this one repaired."

He leads Connor through the jet, which seems even larger on the inside than out, filled with cabins, conference rooms, and studies.

"You know, your name comes up quite often," the Admiral says.

This is news to him, and not welcome news, either. "Why?"

"First, for the things you repair. Then for the fighting."

Connor senses a reprimand on the way. Yes, he's had fewer fights here than usual, but the Admiral is a man of zero tolerance. "Sorry about the fighting."

"Don't be. Oh, there's no question that you're a loose cannon, but more often than not you're aimed in the right direction."

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"From what I can see, each fight you've engaged in has resolved one problem or another. Even the fights you lose. So, even then, you're fixing things." He offers Connor that white-toothed smile. Connor shudders. He tries to hide it, but he's sure the Admiral sees it.

They come to a small dining room and galley. "Here we are," says the Admiral. The old coffeemaker sits on a counter. It's a simple device. Connor's about to pull out a screwdriver to open up the back when he notices that it's not plugged in. When he plugs it in, the light comes on, and it starts to gurgle out coffee into the little glass pot.

"Well, how about that," says the Admiral, with another of his terrible grins.

"I'm not here for the coffeemaker, am I?"

"Have a seat," the Admiral says.

"I'd rather not."

"Have one anyway."

That's when Connor sees the picture. There are several photos up on the wall, but the one that captures Connor's attention is of a

smiling kid about his age. The smile looks familiar. In fact, it looks *exactly* like the Admiral's smile. It's just like Roland had said!

Now Connor wants to bolt, but Risa's voice is in his head again, telling him to scan his options. Sure, he can run. Chances are, he can get to the hatch before the Admiral can stop him—but opening the hatch won't be easy. He could hit the Admiral with one of his tools. That might give him enough time to get away. But where would he go? Beyond the Graveyard there's just desert, desert, and more desert. In the end, he realizes his best choice is to do as the Admiral says. He sits down.

"You don't like me, do you?" asks the Admiral.

Connor won't meet his gaze. "You saved my life by bringing me here. . . ."

"You will not avoid answering this question. You don't like me, do you?"

Connor shudders once more, and this time doesn't even try to hide it. "No, sir, I don't."

"I want to know your reasons."

Connor lets out a single rueful chuckle as his answer.

"You think I'm a slave dealer," says the Admiral. "And that I'm using these Unwinds for my own profit?"

"If you know what I'm going to say, why ask me?"

"I want you to look at me."

But Connor doesn't want to see the man's eyes—or, more accurately, doesn't want the Admiral seeing his.

"I said look at me!"

Reluctantly, Connor lifts his eyes and fixes them on the Admiral's. "I'm looking."

"I believe you are a smart kid. Now I want you to think. *Think!* I am a decorated Admiral of the United States Navy. Do you think I need to be selling children to earn money?"

"I don't know."

"*Think!* Do I care about money and lavish things? I do not live in a mansion. I do not vacation on a tropical island. I spend my time in the

stinking desert living in a rotting plane 365 days a year. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know!"

"I think you do."

Connor stands up now. In spite of the Admiral's tone of voice, he feels less and less intimidated by him. Whether it's wise or whether it's foolhardy, Connor decides to give the Admiral what he's asking for. "You do it because of the power. You do it because it lets you keep hundreds of helpless kids in the palm of your hand. And you do it because you can pick and choose who gets unwound—and which parts you'll get."

The Admiral is caught off guard by this. Suddenly, he's on the defensive. "What did you say?"

"It's obvious! All the scars. And those teeth! They're not the ones you were born with, are they? So, what is it you want from me? Is it my eyes, or my ears? Or maybe it's my hands that can fix things so well. Is that why I'm here? Is it?"

The Admiral's voice is a predatory growl. "You've gone too far."

"No, *you've* gone too far." The fury in the Admiral's eyes should terrify Connor, but his cannon has come loose, and it's beyond locking down. "We come to you in desperation! What you do to us is . . . is . . . obscene!"

"So I'm a monster, then!"

"Yes!"

"And my teeth are the proof."

"Yes!"

"Then you can have them!"

Then the Admiral does something beyond imagining. He reaches into his mouth, grabs onto his own jaw, and rips the teeth out of his mouth. His eyes blazing at Connor, he hurls the hard pink clump in his hand down on the table, where it clatters in two horrible pieces.

Connor screams in shock. It's all there. Two rows of white teeth. Two sets of pink gums. But there's no blood. Why is there no blood? There's no blood in the Admiral's mouth, either. His face seems to have collapsed onto itself—his mouth is just a floppy, puckered hole.

Connor doesn't know which is worse—the Admiral's face, or the bloodless teeth.

"They're called dentures," the Admiral says. "They used to be common in the days before unwinding. But who wants false teeth when, for half the price, you can get real ones straight from a healthy Unwind? I had to get these made in Thailand—no one does it here anymore."

"I . . . I don't understand. . . ." Connor looks at the false teeth, and jerks his head almost involuntarily toward the picture of the smiling boy.

The Admiral follows his gaze. "That," says the Admiral, "was my son. His teeth looked very much like my own at that age, so they designed my dentures using his dental records."

It's a relief to hear an explanation other than the one Roland gave. "I'm sorry."

The Admiral neither accepts nor rejects Connor's apology. "The money I get for placing Unwinds into service positions is used to feed the ones who remain, and to pay for the safe houses and warehouses that get runaway Unwinds off the street. It pays for the aircraft that get them here, and pays off anyone who needs bribery to look the other way. After that, the money that remains goes into the pockets of each Unwind on the day they turn eighteen and are sent out into this unforgiving world. So you see, I may still be, by your definition of the word, a slave dealer—but I am not quite the monster you think I am."

Connor looks to the dentures that still sit there, glistening, on the table. He thinks to grab them and hand them back to the Admiral as a peace offering, but decides the prospect is simply too disgusting. He lets the Admiral do it himself.

"Do you believe the things I've told you today?" the Admiral asks.

Connor considers it, but finds his compass is out of whack. Truth and rumors, facts and lies are all spinning in his head so wildly he still can't say what is what. "I think so," says Connor.

"*Know* so," says the Admiral. "Because you will see things today more awful than an old man's false teeth. I need to know that my trust in you is not misplaced."

* * *

Half a mile away, in aisle fourteen, space thirty-two, sits a FedEx jet that has not moved since it was towed here more than a month ago.

The Admiral has Connor drive him to the jet in his golf cart—but not before retrieving the pistol from his cabinet as "a precaution."

Beneath the starboard wing of the FedEx jet are five mounds of dirt marked by crude headstones. These are the five who suffocated in transit. Their presence here makes this truly a graveyard.

The hatch to the hold is open. Once they've stopped, the Admiral says, "Climb inside and find crate number 2933. Then come out again, and we'll talk."

"You're not coming?"

"I've already been." The Admiral hands him a flashlight. "You'll need this."

Connor stands on the roof of the cart, climbs through the cargo hatch, and turns on the flashlight. The moment he does, he has a shiver of memory. It looks exactly the same as it did a month ago. Open crates, and overtones of urine. The afterbirth of their arrival. He works his way deeper into the jet, passing the crate that he, Hayden, Emby, and Diego had occupied. Finally, he finds number 2933. It was one of the first crates to be loaded. Its hatch is open just a crack. Connor pulls it all the way open, and shines his light in.

When he catches sight of what's inside, he screams and reflexively lurches back, banging his head on the crate behind him. The Admiral could have warned him, but he hadn't. *Okay. Okay. I know what I saw. There's nothing I can do about it. And nothing in there can hurt me.* Still, he takes time to prepare himself before he looks in again.

There are five dead kids in the crate.

All seventeen-year-olds. There's Amp, and Jeeves. Beside them are Kevin, Melinda, and Raul, the three kids who gave out jobs his first day there. All five of the Goldens. There are no signs of blood, no wounds. They could all be asleep except for the fact that Amp's eyes are open and staring at nothing. Connor's mind reels. Did the Admiral do this? Is he mad after all? But why would he? No, it has to have been someone else.

When Connor comes out into the light, the Admiral is paying his respects to the five kids already buried beneath the wing. He straightens the markers and evens out the mounds.

"They disappeared last night. I found them sealed in the crate this morning," the Admiral tells him. "They suffocated, just like the first five did. It's the same crate."

"Who would do this?"

"Who, indeed," says the Admiral. Satisfied with the graves, he turns to Connor. "Whoever it is took out the five most powerful kids . . . which means, whoever did this wants to systematically dismantle the power structure here, so that they can rise to the top of it more quickly."

There's only one Unwind Connor knows of who might be capable of this—but even so, he has a hard time believing Roland would do something this horrible.

"I was meant to discover them," the Admiral says. "They left my golf cart here this morning so that I would. Make no mistake about it, Connor, this is an act of war. They have made a surgical strike. These five were my eyes and ears among the kids here. Now I have none."

The Admiral takes a moment to look at the dark hole of the hold. "Tonight, you and I will come back here to bury them."

Connor swallows hard at the prospect. He wonders who he pissed off in Heaven to get singled out to be the Admiral's new lieutenant.

"We'll bury them far away," says the Admiral, "and we will tell no one that they're dead. Because if word of it gets out, the culprits will have their first victory. If someone does start talking—and they will—we'll track the rumors down to the guilty party."

"And then what?" Connor asks.

"And then justice will be served. Until then, this must be our secret."

As Connor chauffeurs him back to his plane, the Admiral makes his business with Connor clear. "I need a new set of eyes and ears. Someone to keep me abreast of the state of things among the Unwinds. And someone to ferret out the wolf in the herd. I'm asking you to do this for me."

"So you want me to be a spy?"

"Whose side are you on? Are you on my side, or the side of whoever did this?"

Connor now knows why the Admiral brought him here and forced him to see this for himself. It's one thing to be told, and another one entirely to discover the bodies. It makes it brutally clear to Connor where his allegiance must lie.

"Why me?" Connor has to ask.

The Admiral gives him his white-dentured smile. "Because you, my friend, are the least of all evils."

* * *

The next morning, the Admiral makes an announcement that the Goldens were sent off to organize new safe houses. Connor watches Roland for a reaction—perhaps a grin, or a glance at one of his buddies. But there's nothing. Roland gives no telltale sign that he knows what really happened to them. In fact, throughout the morning announcements he seems disinterested and distracted, like he can't wait to get on with his day. There's a good reason for that. Roland's apprenticeship with Cleaver, the helicopter pilot, has been paying off. Over the past weeks Roland has learned to fly the helicopter like a pro, and when Cleaver isn't around he offers free rides to those kids he feels deserve it. He says Cleaver doesn't care, but more likely he just doesn't know.

Connor had assumed that Roland would offer rides to his own inner circle of kids, but that's not the case. Roland rewards work well done—even by kids he doesn't know. He rewards loyalty to one's team. He lets other kids vote on who should get a chance to do a flyby of the yard in the helicopter. In short, Roland acts as if he's the one in charge, and not the Admiral.

When the Admiral is present, he feigns obedience, but when others are gathered around him—and there are always others gathered around Roland—he takes every opportunity to cut the man down. "The Admiral's out of touch," he would say. "He doesn't know what it's like to be one of us. He can't possibly understand who we are and

what we need." And in groups of kids he's already won over, he whispers his theories about the Admiral's teeth, and his scars, and his diabolical plans for all of them. He spreads fear and distrust, using it to unite as many kids as he can.

Connor has to bite his lip to keep himself quiet when he hears Roland mouth off—because if he speaks out in defense of the Admiral, then Roland will know which side of the line he's on.

* * *

There's a recreation jet at the Graveyard, near the meeting tent. Inside there are TVs and electronics, and under its wings are pool tables, a pinball machine, and reasonably comfortable furniture. Connor proposed setting up a water mister, so that the area beneath the wings will stay at least a little bit cooler during the heat of the day. But even more importantly, Connor figures the project will allow him to be a fly on the wall, hearing conversations, cataloguing cliques, and performing general espionage. The problem is, Connor is never a fly on the wall. Instead, his work becomes the center of attention. Kids offer to help him like he's Tom Sawyer painting a fence. They all keep seeing him as a leader when all he wants is to be ignored. He's glad that he never told anyone he's the so-called "Akron AWOL." According to the current rumors, the Akron AWOL took on an entire legion of Juvey-cops, outsmarted the national guard, and liberated half a dozen harvest camps. He has enough attention from other kids without having to contend with that kind of reputation.

While Connor works to install the mister line, Roland keeps an eye on him from the pool table. He finally puts down the cue and comes over.

"You're just a busy little worker bee, ain't ya," Roland says, loud enough for all the kids around to hear. Connor's up on a stepladder, attaching mist piping to the underside of the wing. It allows him the satisfaction of carrying on this conversation while looking down on Roland. "I'm just trying to make life a little easier," Connor says. "We need a mister down here—wouldn't want anyone to *suffocate* in this heat."

Roland keeps a cool poker face. “It looks like you’re the Admiral’s new golden boy, now that the others have left.” He looks around to make sure he has everyone’s attention. “I’ve seen you go up to his jet.”

“He needs things fixed, so I fix them,” says Connor. “That’s all.”

Then, before Roland can push his interrogation, Hayden speaks up from the pool table.

“Connor’s not the only one going up there,” Hayden says. “There’s kids going in and out all the time. Kids with food. Kids cleaning—and I hear he’s taken an interest in a certain mouth breather we all know and love.”

All eyes turn toward Emby, who has become a fixture at the pinball machine since he arrived. “What?”

“You’ve been up to the Admiral’s, haven’t you,” Hayden says. “Don’t deny it!”

“So?”

“So, what does he want? I’m sure we’d all like to know.”

Emby squirms, uncomfortable at the center of anyone’s attention. “He just wanted to know about my family and stuff.”

This is news to Connor. Perhaps the Admiral’s looking for someone else to help him ferret out the killer. True, Emby’s much less visible than Connor, but a fly on the wall shouldn’t actually be a fly on the wall.

“I know what it is,” says Roland. “He wants your hair.”

“Does not!”

“Yeah—his own hair is thinning, right? You got yourself a nice mop up there. The old man wants to scalp you, and send the rest of you to be unwound!”

“Shut up!”

Most of the kids laugh. Sure, it’s a joke, but Connor wonders how many think Roland might be right. Emby must suspect it himself, because he looks kind of sick. It makes Connor furious.

“That’s right, pick on Emby,” says Connor. “Show everyone just how low you are.” He climbs down off the ladder, facing Roland eye to eye. “Hey—did you notice Amp left his megaphone? Why don’t you take his place? You’re such a loudmouth, you’d be perfect for it.”

Roland's response comes without the slightest smile. "I wasn't asked."

* * *

That night Connor and the Admiral have a secret meeting in his quarters, drinking coffee made by a machine rumored to be broken. They speak of Roland and Connor's suspicions about him, but the Admiral is not satisfied.

"I don't want suspicion, I want proof. I don't want your feelings, I want evidence." The Admiral adds some whiskey from a flask to his own coffee.

When Connor is done with his report, he gets up to leave, but the Admiral won't let him. He pours Connor a second cup of coffee, which will surely keep him up all night—but then, he doubts he'll be sleeping well tonight anyway.

"Very few people know what I'm about to tell you," says the Admiral.

"So why tell me?"

"Because it serves my purposes for you to know."

It's an honest answer, but one that still keeps his motives hidden. Connor imagines he must have been very good in a war.

"When I was much younger," begins the Admiral, "I fought in the Heartland War. The scars you so impertinently assumed were transplant scars came from a grenade."

"Which side were you on?"

The Admiral gives Connor that scrutinizing look he's so good at. "How much do you know about the Heartland War?"

Connor shrugs. "It was the last chapter in our history textbook, but we had state testing, so we never got to it."

The Admiral waves his hand in disgust. "Textbooks sugarcoat it anyway. No one wants to remember how it really was. You asked which side I was on. The truth is, there were three sides in the war, not two. There was the Life Army, the Choice Brigade, and the remains of the American military, whose job it was to keep the other two sides from killing each other. That's the side I was on. Unfortunately, we weren't

very successful. You see, a conflict always begins with an issue—a difference of opinion, an argument. But by the time it turns into a war, the issue doesn't matter anymore, because now it's about one thing and one thing only: how much each side hates the other."

The Admiral pours a little more whiskey into his mug before he continues. "There were dark days leading up to the war. Everything that we think defines right and wrong was being turned upside down. On one side, people were murdering abortion doctors to protect the right to life, while on the other side people were getting pregnant just to sell their fetal tissue. And everyone was selecting their leaders not by their ability to lead, but by where they stood on this single issue. It was beyond madness! Then the military fractured, both sides got hold of weapons of war, and two opinions became two armies determined to destroy each other. And then came the Bill of Life."

The mention of it sends ice water down Connor's spine. It never used to bother him, but things change once you become an Unwind.

"I was right there in the room when they came up with the idea that a pregnancy could be terminated retroactively once a child reaches the age of reason," says the Admiral. "At first it was a joke—no one intended it to be taken seriously. But that same year the Nobel Prize went to a scientist who perfected neurografting—the technique that allows every part of a donor to be used in transplant."

The Admiral takes a deep gulp of his coffee. Connor hasn't had a bit of his second cup. The thought of swallowing anything right now is out of the question. It's all he can do to keep the first cup down.

"With the war getting worse," says the Admiral, "we brokered a peace by bringing both sides to the table. Then we proposed the idea of unwinding, which would terminate unwanteds without actually ending their lives. We thought it would shock both sides into seeing reason—that they would stare at each other across the table and someone would blink. But nobody blinked. The choice to terminate without ending life—it satisfied the needs of both sides. The Bill of Life was signed, the Unwind Accord went into effect, and the war was over. Everyone was so happy to end the war, no one cared about the consequences."

The Admiral's thoughts go far away for a moment, then he waves his hand. "I'm sure you know the rest."

Connor might not know all the particulars, but he knows the gist. "People wanted parts."

"Demanded is more like it. A cancerous colon could be replaced with a healthy new one. An accident victim who would have died from internal injuries could get fresh organs. A wrinkled arthritic hand could be replaced by one fifty years younger. And all those new parts had to come from somewhere." The Admiral paused for a moment to consider it. "Of course, if more people had been organ donors, unwinding never would have happened . . . but people like to keep what's theirs, even after they're dead. It didn't take long for ethics to be crushed by greed. Unwinding became big business, and people let it happen."

The Admiral glances over at the picture of his son. Even without the Admiral telling him, Connor realizes why—but he allows the Admiral the dignity of his confession.

"My son, Harlan, was a great kid. Smart. But he was troubled—you know the type."

"I *am* the type," says Connor, offering a slight grin.

The Admiral nods. "It was just about ten years ago. He got in with the wrong group of friends, got caught stealing. Hell, I was the same at his age—that's why my parents first sent me to military school, to straighten me out. Only, for Harlan there was a different option. A more . . . *efficient* option."

"You had him unwound."

"As one of the fathers of the Unwind Accord, I was expected to set an example." He presses his thumb and forefinger against his eyes, stemming off tears before they can flow. "We signed the order, then changed our minds. But it was already too late. They had taken Harlan right out of school to the harvest camp, and rushed him through. It had already been done."

It had never occurred to Connor to consider the toll unwinding had on the ones who signed the order. He never thought he could have

sympathy for a parent who could do that—or sympathy for one of the men who had made unwinding possible.

"I'm sorry," Connor says, and means it.

The Admiral stiffens up—sobers up—almost instantly. "You shouldn't be. It's only because of his unwinding that you're all here. Afterward, my wife left me and formed a foundation in Harlan's memory. I left the military, spent several years more drunk than I am now, and then, three years ago, I had The Big Idea. This place, these kids, are the result of it. To date I've saved more than a thousand kids from unwinding."

Connor now understands why the Admiral was telling him these things. It was more than just a confession. It was a way of securing Connor's loyalty—and it worked. The Admiral was a darkly obsessed man, but his obsession saved lives. Hayden once said that Connor had integrity. That same integrity locks him firmly on the Admiral's side, and so Connor holds up his mug. "To Harlan!" he says.

"To Harlan!" echoes the Admiral, and together they drink to his name. "Bit by bit I am making things right, Connor," the Admiral says. "Bit by bit, and in more ways than one."

OceanofPDF.com

35 · Lev

Where Lev was between the time he left CyFi and his arrival at the Graveyard is less important than where his thoughts resided. They resided in places colder and darker than the many places he hid.

He had survived the month through a string of unpleasant compromises and crimes of convenience—whatever was necessary to keep himself alive. Lev quickly became street-smart, and survival-wise. They say it takes complete immersion in a culture to learn its language and its ways. It didn't take him very long to learn the language of the lost.

Once he landed in the safe-house network, he quickly made it known that he was not a guy to be trifled with. He didn't tell people he was a tithe. Instead, he told them his parents signed the order to have him unwound after he was arrested for armed robbery. It was funny to him, because he had never even touched a gun. It amazed him that the other kids couldn't read the lie in his face—he had always been such a bad liar. But then, when he looked in the mirror, what he saw in his own eyes scared him.

By the time he reached the Graveyard, most kids knew enough to stay away from him. Which is exactly what he wanted.

* * *

The same night that the Admiral and Connor have their secret conference, Lev heads out into the oil-slick dark of the moonless night, keeping his flashlight off. His first night there he had successfully slipped out to find Connor, in order to set him straight about a few things. Since then, the bruise from Connor's punch has faded, and they haven't spoken of it again. He hasn't spoken much to Connor at all, because Lev has other things on his mind.

Each night since then he's tried to sneak away, but every time, he's been caught and sent back. Now that the Admiral's five watchdogs

have left, though, the kids on sentry duty are getting lax. As Lev sneaks between the jets, he finds that a few of them are even asleep on the job. Stupid of the Admiral to send those other kids away without having anyone to replace them.

Once he's far enough away he turns on his flashlight and tries to find his destination. It's a destination told to him by a girl he had encountered a few weeks before. She was very much like him. He suspects he'll meet others tonight who are very much like him as well.

Aisle thirty, space twelve. It's about as far from the Admiral as you can get and still be in the Graveyard. The space is occupied by an ancient DC-10, crumbling to pieces in its final resting place. When Lev swings open the hatch and climbs in, he finds two kids inside, both of whom bolt upright at the sight of him and take defensive postures.

"My name's Lev," he says. "I was told to come here."

He doesn't know these kids, but that's no surprise—he hasn't been in the Graveyard long enough to know that many kids here. One is an Asian girl with pink hair. The other kid has a shaved head and is covered in tattoos.

"And who told you to come here?" asks the flesh-head.

"This girl I met in Colorado. Her name's Julie-Ann."

Then a third figure comes out from the shadows. It's not a kid but an adult—midtwenties, maybe. He's smiling. The guy has greasy red hair, a straggly goatee to match, and a boney face with sunken cheeks. It's Cleaver, the helicopter pilot.

"So Julie-Ann sent you!" he says. "Cool! How is she?"

Lev takes a moment to think about his answer. "She did her job," Lev tells him.

Cleaver nods. "Well, it is what it is."

The other two kids introduce themselves. The flesh-head is Blaine, the girl is Mai.

"What about that boeuf who flies the helicopter with you?" Lev asks Cleaver. "Is he part of this too?"

Mai gives a disgusted laugh. "Roland? Not on your life!"

"Roland isn't exactly . . . *the material* for our little group," Cleaver says. "So, did you come here to give us the good news about Julie-Ann, or are you here for another reason?"

"I'm here because I want to be here."

"You say it," says Cleaver, "but we still don't know you're for real."

"Tell us about yourself," says Mai.

Lev prepares to give them the armed-robbery version, but before he opens his mouth, he changes his mind. The moment calls for honesty. This must begin with the truth. So he tells them everything, from the moment he was kidnapped by Connor to his time with CyFi and the weeks after that. When he's done, Cleaver seems very, very pleased.

"So, you're a tithe! That's great. You don't even know how great that is!"

"What now?" asks Lev. "Am I in, or not?"

The others become quiet. Serious. He feels some sort of ritual is about to begin.

"Tell me, Lev," says Cleaver. "How much do you hate the people who were going to unwind you?"

"A lot."

"Sorry, that's not good enough."

Lev closes his eyes, digs down, and thinks about his parents. He thinks about what they planned to do to him, and how they made him actually want it.

"How much do you hate them?" Cleaver asks again.

"Totally and completely," answers Lev.

"And how much do you hate the people who would take parts of you and make them parts of themselves?"

"Totally and completely."

"And how much do you want to make them, and everyone else in the world, pay?"

"Totally and completely." Someone has to pay for the unfairness of it all. *Everyone* has to pay. He'll make them.

"Good," says Cleaver.

Lev is amazed by the depth of his own fury—but he's becoming less and less frightened of it. He tells himself that's a good thing.

"Maybe he's for real," says Blaine.

If Lev makes this commitment, he knows there's no turning back. "One thing I need to know," Lev asks, "because Julie-Ann . . . she wasn't very clear about it. I want to know what you believe."

"What we believe?" says Mai. She looks at Blaine, and Blaine laughs. Cleaver, however, puts his hand up to quiet him. "No—no, it's a good question. A real question. It deserves a real answer. If you're asking if we have a cause, we don't, so get that out of your head." Cleaver gestures broadly, his hands and arms filling the space around him. "Causes are old news. We believe in randomness. Earthquakes! Tornados! We believe in forces of nature—and *we* are forces of nature. We are havoc. We're chaos. We mess with the world."

"And we messed pretty good with the Admiral, didn't we," says Blaine slyly. Cleaver throws him a sharp gaze, and Mai actually looks scared. It's almost enough to give Lev second thoughts.

"How did you mess with the Admiral?"

"It's done," says Mai, her body language both anxious and angry. "We messed, and now it's done. We don't talk about things that are done. Right?"

Cleaver gives her a nod, and she seems to relax a bit. "The point is," says Cleaver, "it doesn't matter who or what we mess with, just as long as we mess. The way we see it, the world doesn't *move* if things don't get shaken up—am I right?"

"I guess."

"Well, then, *we* are the movers and shakers." Cleaver smiles and points a finger at Lev. "The question is, are you one too? Do you have what it takes to be one of us?"

Lev takes a long look at these three. These are the kinds of people his parents would hate. He could join them just out of spite, but that's not enough—not this time. There must be more. Yet, as he stands there, Lev realizes that there *is* more. It's invisible, but it's there, like the deadly charge lurking in a downed power line. Anger, but not just anger: a will to act on it as well.

"All right, I'm in." Back at home Lev always felt part of something larger than himself. Until now, he hadn't realized how much he missed

that feeling.

"Welcome to the family," says Cleaver, and gives him a slap on the back so painful, he sees stars.

OceanofPDF.com

36 · Risa

Risa is the first to notice something's wrong with Connor. Risa is the first to care that something's wrong with Lev.

In a moment of selfishness, she finds herself aggravated by it, because things are going so well for her now. She finally has a place to be. She wishes this could remain her sanctuary beyond her eighteenth birthday, because in the outside world she'd never be able to do the things she's doing now. It would be practicing medicine without a license—fine when you're in survival mode, but not in the civilized world. Perhaps, after she turned eighteen, she could go to college, and medical school—but that takes money, connections, and she'd have to face even more competition than in her music classes. She wonders if maybe she could join the military and become an Army medic. You don't have to be a boeuf to be in a medical unit. Whatever her choice ends up being, the important thing is that there could *be* a choice. For the first time in a long time she can see a future for herself. With all these good thoughts in her life, the last thing she wants is something that will shoot it all down.

This is what fills Risa's mind as she makes her way to one of the study jets. The Admiral has three of his most accessible and well-appointed jets set aside as study spaces, complete with libraries, computers, and the resources to learn anything you want to learn. "This is not a school," the Admiral told them shortly after they arrived. "There are no teachers, there are no exams." Oddly, it's precisely that lack of expectation that keeps the study jets full most of the time.

Risa's duties start shortly after dawn, and it has become her habit to begin her day at one of the study jets, since at that time of the morning she's usually the only one there. She likes it that way, because the things she wants to learn make other kids uncomfortable. It's not the subject matter that bothers them, it's the fact that Risa's the one studying it. Anatomy and medical texts, mostly. Kids assume that just

because she works in the medical jet, she knows all there is to know. It disturbs them to see her actually having to learn it.

When she arrives today, however, she discovers Connor already there. She stops at the hatch, surprised. He's so absorbed in whatever he's reading that he doesn't hear her come in. She takes a moment to look at him. She's never seen him so tired—not even when they were on the run. Still, she's thrilled to see him. They have both been so busy, there hasn't been much time to spend together.

"Hi, Connor."

Startled, he looks up quickly and slams his book closed. When he realizes who it is, he relaxes. "Hi, Risa." By the time she sits down beside him, he's smiling, and doesn't seem quite so tired. She's glad she can have that kind of effect on him.

"You're up early."

"No, I'm up late," he says. "I couldn't sleep, so I came here. He glances out one of the little round windows. "Is it morning already?"

"Just about. What are you reading?"

He tries to push it out of view, but it's too late for that. He has two books out. The bottom volume is a book on engineering. That's no surprise, considering the interest he's taken in the way things work. It's the book on top—the one his nose was in when she arrived—that catches her by surprise, almost making her laugh.

"Criminology for Morons?"

"Yeah, well, everyone needs a hobby."

She tries to take a long look into him, but he looks away. "There's something wrong, isn't there?" she asks. "I don't need to read *Connor for Morons* to know that you're in some kind of trouble."

He looks everywhere but into her eyes. "It isn't trouble. At least not for me. Or maybe it is in some ways, I don't know."

"Want to talk about it?"

"That," says Connor, "is the *last* thing I want to do." He takes a deep breath and shifts in his chair. "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

"You don't sound too sure."

He looks at Risa, then looks at the hatch, making sure they're still alone. Then he leans in close to her and says, "Now that the Goldens are . . . no longer around, the Admiral's going to be looking for replacements. I want you to promise me that if he asks you to help him, you'll turn him down."

"The Admiral doesn't even know I exist. Why would he ask me for anything?"

"Because he asked me," Connor says in an intense whisper. "And I think he's asked Emby, too."

"Emby?"

"All I'm saying is that I don't want you to be a target!"

"A target for what? For whom?"

"Shhh! Keep your voice down!"

She looks again at that book he was reading, trying to piece it all together, but there just aren't enough pieces. She gets close to him, forcing him to look at her. "I want to help you," she says. "I'm worried about you. Please let me help you."

He darts his eyes back and forth, trying to find an escape from her gaze, but he can't. Suddenly, he bridges the small distance between them and kisses her. She did not expect it, and when he breaks off the kiss she realizes from the look on his face that he hadn't expected it either.

"What was that for?"

It takes a moment for him to get his brain functioning again. "That," he says, "is in case something happens and I don't see you again."

"Fine," she says, and she pulls him into another kiss—this one longer than the first. When she breaks it off, she says, "That's in case I *do* see you again."

He leaves, awkwardly stumbling out and nearly falling down the steel steps to the ground. In spite of all that just went on between them, Risa has to smile. It's amazing that something as simple as a kiss can overpower the worst of worries.

* * *

Lev's troubles appear to be of a different nature, and Risa finds herself frightened by him. He comes to infirmary call that morning with a bad sunburn. Since he's a fast runner, he's been assigned messenger duty. Mostly, it involves running back and forth between the jets carrying notes. It's one of the Admiral's rules that all messengers wear sunscreen, but it seems Lev is no longer bound by anyone's rules.

They make small talk for a bit, but it's awkward, so she quickly gets down to business. "Well, now that your hair is longer, at least your forehead and neck seem to have been spared. Take off your shirt."

"I kept my shirt on most of the time," he says.

"Let's have a look anyway."

Reluctantly, he removes his shirt. He's burned there as well, but not as badly as on his arms and cheeks. What catches her attention, however, is a welt on his back in the faint shape of a hand. She brushes her fingers across it.

"Who did this to you?" she asks.

"Nobody," he says, grabbing the shirt back from her and slipping it on. "Just some guy."

"Is someone on your team giving you trouble?"

"I told you, it's nothing—what are you, my mother?"

"No," says Risa. "If I were your mother, I'd be rushing you off to the nearest harvest camp."

She means it as a joke, but Lev doesn't find it funny. "Just give me something to put on the burns."

There's a deadness to his voice that's haunting. She goes to the cabinet and finds a tube of aloe cream, but she doesn't hand it to him just yet. "I miss the old Lev," she says.

That makes him look at her. "No offense, but you didn't even know me."

"Maybe not, but at least back then I wanted to."

"And you don't want to anymore?"

"I don't know," says Risa. "The kid I'm looking at now is a little too creepy for my taste." She can tell that gets to him. She doesn't know why it should, because he seems proud of his new creep factor.

"The old Lev," he says, "tricked you into trusting him, then turned you in to the police the first chance he got."

"And the new Lev wouldn't do that?"

He thinks about it, then says, "The new Lev has better things to do."

She puts the tube of burn cream in his hand. "Yeah, well, if you see the old one—the one who always thought about God and his purpose and stuff—tell him we want him back."

There's an uneasy silence and he looks down at the tube in his hand. For a moment she thinks he might say something that brings a hint of that other kid back into the room, but all he says is, "How often do I put this on?"

* * *

There's a work call the following day.

Risa hates them, because she knows there isn't going to be anything for her, but everyone must attend work call. Today, the gathering isn't run by an Unwind, it's run by Cleaver. Apparently he's temporarily taken over the job, since no one's been found to fulfill Amp's duties. Risa doesn't like him. He's got an unpleasant, slimy look about him.

There are only a few calls for work today. Someone wants a plumber's assistant in some godforsaken town named Beaver's Breath; there's some farm work out in California; and the third job is just plain weird.

"Prudhoe Bay, Alaska," Cleaver says. "You'll be working on an oil pipeline until you're eighteen. From what I hear, it's one of the coldest, most brutal places on Earth. But, hey, it's a way out, right? I need three volunteers."

The first hand up belongs to an older kid who looks like punishment is his middle name—like he was born for brutal work, right down to his shaved head. The second hand raised catches Risa by surprise. It's Mai. What is Mai doing volunteering for work on a pipeline? Why would she leave the boy she was so attached to back in the warehouse? But then, come to think of it, Risa hasn't seen that boy around the Graveyard at all. While she tries to process this, a third

hand goes up. It's a younger kid. A smaller kid. A kid with a bad sunburn. Lev's hand is held high, and he gets chosen for the pipeline job.

Risa just stands there in disbelief, then she searches for Connor in the crowd. He's seen it too. He looks at Risa and shrugs. Well, maybe this is just a shrug to Connor, but it's not to her.

When the meeting breaks up, she makes a beeline for Lev, but he's already vanished into the mob. So the instant Risa gets back to the infirmary, she calls for a messenger, and another and another, sending them each off with redundant notes reminding kids to take their medications. Finally, after her fourth call, the messenger they send is Lev.

He must see the look on her face, because he just stands there at the hatch not coming in. One of the other medics is there, so Risa glares at Lev, pointing toward the back. "That way. Now!"

"I don't take orders," he says.

"That way!" she says again, even more forcefully. "NOW!"

Apparently he does take orders after all, because he steps in and marches toward the back of the plane. Once they reach the storage room at the back, she closes the bulkhead door behind them and lays into him.

"What the hell are you thinking?"

His face is steel. It's the door of a safe she can't get into. "I've never been to Alaska," he says. "I might as well go now."

"You've barely been here a week! Why are you in such a hurry to leave—and for a job like that?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you or to anyone else. I raised my hand, I got chosen, and that's all."

Risa crosses her arms in defiance of his defiance. "You don't go anywhere if I don't give you a clean bill of health. I could tell the Admiral you've got . . . you've got . . . infectious hepatitis."

"You wouldn't!"

"Just watch me."

He storms away from her, kicking the wall in fury, then storms back. "He won't believe you! And even if he does, you can't keep me

sick forever!"

"Why are you so determined to go?"

"There are things I have to do," Lev says. "I don't expect you to understand. I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be, but I've changed. I'm not that same stupid, naive kid you guys kidnapped two months ago. Nothing you can do will keep me from leaving here and doing what I've got to do."

Risa says nothing, because she knows he's right. She can stall him at best, but she can't stop him.

"So," says Lev, a bit more calmly now. "Do I have infectious hepatitis or not?"

She sighs. "No. You don't."

He turns to leave, opening the bulkhead door. He's so determined to move on, he doesn't even think to offer her a good-bye.

"You're wrong about one thing," she says before he's out the door. "You're just as naive as you were before. And maybe twice as stupid."

Then he's gone. That same afternoon, an unmarked white van comes to take him, Mai, and the flesh-head away. Once again, Risa thinks she'll never see Lev again. Once again, she'll be wrong.

OceanofPDF.com

37 · Emby and the Admiral

Emby has no idea of all the gears turning in the Graveyard—or even that he's one of them. His world is contained within the square panels of his comic books and the well-defined borders of a pinball machine. Staying within those borders has been a successful defense against the injustice and cruelty of life outside of them.

He does not question the oddness of the trio that just left for Alaska; it's not his business. He does not sense the tension in Connor; Connor can take care of himself. He does not spend time wondering about Roland; he just stays out of Roland's way.

But keeping his head down does not keep him in the safe zone. Emby is, in fact, the central bumper on the pinball board, and every single ball in play is about to rebound off of him.

* * *

The Admiral has called for him.

Emby now stands nervously at the entrance to what was once the mobile command center for a president of the United States. There are two other men here. They are in white shirts and dark ties. The black sedan that waits at the bottom of the stairs must be theirs. The Admiral sits at his desk. Emby tries to decide whether he should enter, or turn around and run away. But the Admiral sees him, and his gaze freezes Emby's feet in place.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Yes. Have a seat, Zachary."

He forces his feet to move toward the chair across from the Admiral. "Emby," he says. "Everyone just calls me Emby."

"Is that your choice, or theirs?" asks the Admiral.

"Well . . . theirs, mostly—but I got used to it."

"Never let anyone else name you," says the Admiral. He leafs through a file with Emby's picture clipped to the cover. It's a full file,

and Emby can't imagine how there could be enough interesting things in his life to fill a file that thick. "You may not realize this, but you're a very special boy," says the Admiral.

Emby can only look down at his shoelaces, which are, as always, moments away from coming untied. "Is that why I'm here, sir? Because I'm special?"

"Yes, Zachary. And because of it, you're going to be leaving us today."

Emby looks up. "What?"

"There's someone who wants to meet you. In fact, it's someone who has been looking for you for a very long time."

"Really?"

"These men will take you there."

"Who is it?" Emby has a longstanding fantasy that one of his parents is actually still alive. If not his mother, then his father. He has always dreamed that his father was actually a spy—that his death all those years ago was just the official story, and he's been off in the untamed corners of the world fighting evil, like a real-life comic-book hero.

"It's no one you know," says the Admiral, dashing Emby's hopes. "She's a good woman, though. Actually, she's my ex-wife."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"It will be clear to you soon enough. Don't worry."

Which, to Emby, is an open invitation to worry without end. It makes him start to hyperventilate, which makes his bronchial tubes begin to constrict. He starts to wheeze. The Admiral looks at him with concern.

"Are you all right?"

"Asthma," Emby says between wheezes. He pulls out an inhaler from his pocket and takes a puff.

"Yes," says the Admiral. "My son had asthma—he responded very well to Xolair." He looks up at one of the men behind Emby. "Please make sure you get some Xolair for that lung."

"Yes, Admiral Dunfee."

It takes a moment for this to bounce around on the pegs and pins in Emby's mind before hitting his mental flippers.

"Dunfee? Your last name is *Dunfee*?"

"We have no last names in the Graveyard," says the Admiral, then he stands and grabs Emby's hand, shaking it. "Good-bye, Zachary. When you see my ex-wife, give her my regards."

Emby can only squeak a wordless response as the men take him by the arms and lead him out and down toward the waiting sedan.

* * *

Once the boy is gone, Admiral Dunfee leans back in his chair. With all the things threatening his domain, here's one thing he can be pleased with. He allows himself a brief moment of satisfaction, glancing over at the smiling picture of his son Harlan—better known as Humphrey in modern folklore, but those who loved him know his real name. Yes, the Admiral is redeeming himself, and setting things right, bit by bit by bit.

OceanofPDF.com

38 · Mob

Emby's disappearance goes undiscovered for almost two days, until someone takes a look at the pinball machine and notices that something is missing.

"Where's the mouth breather?" people begin to ask. It's not until nightfall that people start asking seriously, and by morning it's clear that he's gone.

Some people claim they saw him wandering off into the desert. Some people claim there was a mysterious car that took him away. Ralphy Sherman claims he saw Emby beamed up to the mother ship to be with his own kind. Every suggestion is mulled over. Every theory is entertained. A search is mounted by Emby's team. It turns up nothing.

Through all of this, the Admiral is silent.

Now Emby, the kid at the bottom of the pecking order, has suddenly become everyone's best friend, and his disappearance fuel for everyone's fire. Roland uses it to further his own agenda of fear—after all, he was the one who very publicly predicted that Emby would vanish. He didn't believe it for an instant, but now that his prediction has come true, he has everyone's attention.

"You watch," Roland tells all those who will listen. "The Admiral's going to show up one of these days with a nice, thick head of Emby-hair hidden beneath his hat—and any one of us could be next. Has he been looking at your eyes? Has he been listening to the sound of your voice? If he wants a part of you, you'll end up just like Emby!"

He's so convincing, he almost believes it himself.

Connor has a completely different view of the situation. He's certain that Roland did away with Emby so he could use his disappearance to gather support. For Connor, it's more proof that Roland killed the Goldens—that he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Connor brings his suspicions to the Admiral. He listens, but still says nothing. The Admiral knows that claiming responsibility for Emby's absence would play right into the mania that Roland is creating. The Admiral could tell Connor that he was the one who sent the boy away, but that would beg questions that he has no desire to answer. He decides to let Connor think that Roland did it—it would motivate Connor even more to find that crucial link connecting Roland to the murders. Because now the Admiral has come to believe in Roland's guilt as well.

"Forget the missing boy," he tells Connor. "Concentrate on proving Roland killed the others. Someone must have helped him—someone must know. Right now Roland has too many supporters. We can't take him down without hard evidence."

"Then somehow I'll get you evidence," Connor tells him. "I'll do it for Emby."

After Connor leaves the Admiral's jet, the Admiral sits alone, pondering the ins and outs of the situation. Things in the Graveyard have gotten dicey before, but dicey situations have always been the Admiral's specialty. He's sure he can play this one to a successful conclusion, and get everything back under his control. As he sits there in his jet, he gets an ache in his shoulder that spreads down to his arm. No doubt it's another manifestation of his various war wounds. He calls for a medic to bring him some aspirin.

OceanofPDF.com

39 · Roland

Roland opens the envelope that Hayden has just handed him, and reads the note inside:

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. I'LL MAKE YOU A DEAL. MEET ME AT THE FEDEX JET.

The note isn't signed, but it doesn't have to be. Roland knows who sent it. Connor's the only one with nerve enough to blackmail him. The only one stupid enough. The note sets Roland's mind spinning. *I know what you did.* There are quite a lot of activities Connor could be talking about. He might know that Roland has been sabotaging the generators so he can blame the Admiral for outrageous living conditions. Or he might know about the bottle of ipecac he stole from the infirmary while pretending to flirt with Risa. He was planning to use the stuff to spike the drinks, create a puke-fest, and then blame the Admiral for giving them all food poisoning. Yes, there are plenty of things Connor could have found out about. Roland puts the note in his pocket, showing no emotion, and glares at Hayden. "So you're Connor's messenger boy now?"

"Hey," says Hayden, "I'm Switzerland: neutral as can be, and also good with chocolate."

"Get lost," Roland tells him.

"Already am." And Hayden strolls away.

It burns Roland that he might have to bargain with Connor, but there are worse things. And after all, bargains and subterfuge are a way of life for him. So he heads off toward the FedEx jet, making sure he takes a knife with him—in case there's no deal to be made.

OceanofPDF.com

40 · Connor

"I'm here," Roland calls from outside the FedEx jet. "What do you want?"

Connor remains hidden inside the hold. He knows he's only going to get one chance at this, so he's got to do it right. "Come inside, and we'll talk about it."

"No, you come out."

Nice try, Connor thinks, *but this is going to be on my terms.* "If you don't come in, I'll tell everyone what I know. I'll show everyone what I *found*."

Silence for a moment, then he sees Roland's silhouette as he climbs into the hold. Connor has the advantage now. His eyes have adjusted to the dim light of the hold, and Roland's have not. He leaps forward and firmly plants the muzzle of the Admiral's gun against Roland's back. "Don't move."

Instinctively, Roland's hands go up, as if he's been in this position many times before. "Is this your deal?"

"Shut up." Connor uses one hand to frisk him, finds the concealed knife, and hurls it out of the cargo hold. Satisfied, he pushes the gun harder against Roland. "Move."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"You know where to go. Crate 2933. Move!"

Roland begins to walk forward, squeezing between the narrow rows of crates. Connor is conscious of every movement of Roland's body. Even with a gun to his back, Roland is arrogant and sure of himself. "You don't want to kill me," he says. "Everyone here likes me. If you do anything to me, they'll tear you apart."

They reach crate 2933. "Get in," Connor says.

That's when Roland makes his move. He spins, knocks Connor back, and grabs for the gun. Connor expected this. He holds the gun out of reach and, using the crate behind him for leverage, places his

foot firmly in Roland's gut and pushes him back. Roland falls backward into crate 2933. The second he does, Connor lurches forward, slams the hatch, and seals it. While Roland rages inside, Connor takes aim at the crate and fires the gun once, twice, three times.

The blasts echo, blending with the terrified screams from within the crate, and then Roland shouts, "What are you doing? Are you *insane*?"

Connor's shots had been very precise; they were low, and directed at a corner of the crate. "I've given you something your victims never had," Connor tells him. "I've given you airholes." Then he sits down. "Now we talk."

OceanofPDF.com

41 · Mob

Half a mile away, a search party returns from the desert. They didn't find Emby. Instead, they found five unmarked graves behind a distant outcropping of rocks. In a few short minutes, word spreads through the ranks like flames in a steady wind. The Goldens have been found, and apparently they weren't so golden after all. Someone suggests that the Admiral did it himself. The suggestion becomes a rumor, and the rumor quickly becomes accepted as fact. The Admiral killed his own! He's everything Roland says he is—and, hey, where *is* Roland? He's missing too? So is Connor! What has the Admiral done to them?!

A mob of Unwinds with a hundred reasons to be angry have all simultaneously found one more, and that's all it takes to push them over the edge. The mob storms toward the Admiral's jet, picking up more and more kids along the way.

OceanofPDF.com

42 · Risa

A few minutes earlier, Risa had responded to the Admiral's request and showed up at his jet with some aspirin. She was greeted by the Admiral, who, as she had told Connor, didn't even know her name. Now he chats with her, telling her that the experience she's getting here is better than what anyone her age gets in the outside world. She tells him of her thoughts of becoming an Army medic, and he seems pleased. He complains of shoulder pain, and asks her for the aspirin. She gives it to him, but just to be on the safe side, she checks his blood pressure, and he applauds her for being so thorough.

There's some sort of commotion outside that makes it hard for her to focus on taking the Admiral's blood pressure. Commotion is not unusual here. Whatever it is, Risa suspects it will end with bandages and ice packs for someone. Her work is never done.

OceanofPDF.com

43 · Mob

Furious kids begin to arrive at the Admiral's jet.

"Get him! Get him! Pull him out!"

They climb the steel steps. The hatch is open, but just a crack. Risa looks out at the wave of mayhem, like a human tsunami pounding toward her.

"He's got a girl in there with him!"

The first of the kids reaches the top of the stairs and heaves the hatch open, only to be met by Risa, and a brutal punch to the jaw. It sends him tumbling over the side and to the ground—but there's more where he came from.

"Don't let her close that door!"

The second kid is met by an aerosol burst of bactine right to his eyes. The pain is excruciating. He stumbles backward into the other kids coming up the stairs, and they tumble like dominos. Risa grabs the hatch, swings it closed, and seals it from the inside.

Kids are on the wings now, finding every piece of loose metal and prying it up. It's amazing how much of a plane can be shredded by bare-handed fury.

"Break the windows! Pull them out!"

Kids on the ground throw rocks that hit their comrades as often as they hit the jet. On the inside it sounds like a hailstorm. The Admiral blanches at the scene outside the windows. His heart races. His shoulder and arm ache. "How did this happen? How did I let this happen?"

The barrage of stones batters the fuselage, but nothing breaks the armored steel, nothing cracks the bulletproof glass of the former Air Force One. Then someone tears out the power line connecting the jet to its generator. The lights go out, the air-conditioning shuts down, and the entire jet quickly begins to bake in the broiling sun.

OceanofPDF.com

44 · Connor

“You murdered Amp, Jeeves, and the rest of the Goldens.”

“You’re crazy!”

Connor sits outside crate 2933, wiping his brow in the heat. Roland’s voice comes from inside, muffled, but loud enough to hear.

“You got rid of them so you could take their place,” Connor says.

“I swear, when I get out of here, I’ll—”

“You’ll what? You’ll kill me like you killed them? Like you killed Emby?”

No response from Roland.

“I said I’d make you a deal,” says Connor, “and I will. If you confess, I’ll make sure the Admiral spares your life.”

In response, Roland suggests Connor perform a physical impossibility.

“Confess, Roland. It’s the only way I’m letting you out of there.” Connor is sure that, if put under enough pressure, Roland will confess to what he’s done. The Admiral needs evidence, and what better evidence than a full confession.

“I have nothing to confess to!”

“Fine,” says Connor. “I can wait. I have all day.”

OceanofPDF.com

45 · Mob

The fortress of the Admiral's jet is impenetrable. The temperature inside is soaring past one hundred. Risa's handling the heat, but the Admiral doesn't look too good. She still can't open the door, because the mob is relentlessly trying to get in.

Outside, whatever kids aren't swarming over the Admiral's jet are spreading out. If they can't get to the Admiral, then they'll destroy everything else. The study jets, the dormitory jets, even the recreation jet—everything is being torn apart, and whatever can burn is set aflame. They are filled with an insatiable fury, and beneath it is a strange joy that the anger can finally be released. And beneath the joy is more fury.

From halfway across the Graveyard, Cleaver sees the smoke rising in the distance, beckoning him. Cleaver is drawn to mayhem. He must be a witness to it! He gets into his helicopter and flies toward the angry mob.

He sets down as close to the chaos as he dares to get. Have his deeds in any way led to this? He hopes so. He turns off the engine, letting the blades slow, so he can hear the wonderful sounds of havoc. . . . Then the angry Unwinds turn toward him.

"It's Cleaver! He works for the Admiral."

Suddenly, Cleaver is the center of attention. He can't help but feel this is a good thing.

OceanofPDF.com

46 · Connor

Roland is slowly breaking. He confesses to many things, petty acts of vandalism and theft, that Connor couldn't care less about. But this is going to work. It has to work. Connor has no other plan to bring him to justice—it *has* to work.

"I've done a lot of things," Roland tells him through the three bullet holes in the crate. "But I never killed anybody!"

Connor just listens. He barely speaks to him anymore. Connor finds the less he speaks, the more Roland does.

"How do you know they're even dead?"

"Because I buried them. Me and the Admiral."

"Then *you* did it!" says Roland. "You did it, and you're trying to make me take the blame!"

Now Connor begins to see the flaw in his plan. If he lets Roland out without a confession, then he's a dead man. But he can't keep him in there forever. His options are now narrower than the spaces between the crates.

Then a voice calls to them from outside. "Is anyone there? Connor? Roland? Anybody?" It's Hayden.

"Help!" screams Roland at the top of his lungs. "Help, he's crazy! Come in here and let me out!" But his screams don't make it out of the hold. Connor gets up and makes his way to the entrance. Hayden looks up at him. He's not his usual cool self, and there's a nasty bruise on his forehead, like he was hit by something.

"Thank God! Connor, you've got to get back there! It's nuts—you've gotta stop it—they'll listen to you!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The Admiral killed the Goldens—and then everyone thought he'd killed you. . . ."

"The Admiral didn't kill anybody!"

"Well, try telling *them* that!"

"Them *who*?"

"Everybody! They're tearing the place apart!"

Connor sees the far-off smoke, and he takes a quick glance back into the hold, deciding that, for the moment, Roland can wait. He hops down to the ground and races off with Hayden. "Tell me everything, from the beginning."

* * *

When Connor arrives at the scene, his mind keeps trying to reject what his eyes are telling him. He stares, part of him hoping the vision will go away. It's like the aftermath of some natural disaster. Broken bits of metal, glass, and wood are everywhere. Pages torn from books flutter past smashed electronics. Bonfires burn, and kids hurl in more wreckage to feed the flames.

"My God!"

There's a group of jeering kids near the helicopter, gathered like a rugby scrum, kicking something in the center. Then Connor realizes it's not some*thing*, it's some*one*. He races in, pulling the kids apart. The kids who know Connor immediately back off, and the others follow suit. The man on the ground is battered and bloody. It's Cleaver. Connor kneels down and props up his head.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay." But even as he says it, Connor knows it's not true: He's been beaten to a pulp.

Cleaver grimaces, his mouth bloody. Then Connor realizes that this isn't a grimace at all. It's a smile. "Chaos, man," Cleaver says weakly. "Chaos. It's beautiful. Beautiful."

Connor doesn't know what to say to this. The man's delirious. He has to be.

"It's okay," Cleaver says. "This is an okay way to die. Better than suffocating, right?"

Connor can only stare at him. "What . . . what did you say?" No one but Connor and the Admiral knew about the suffocations. Connor, the Admiral, and the one who did it . . .

"*You* killed the Goldens! You and Roland!"

"Roland?" says Cleaver. In spite of his pain, he actually seems insulted. "Roland's not one of us. He doesn't even know." Cleaver catches the look on Connor's face and begins to laugh. Then the laugh becomes a rattle that resolves into a long, slow exhale. The grin never entirely leaves his face. His eyes stay open, but there's nothing in them. Just like his victim, Amp.

"Oh, crap, he's dead, isn't he," says Hayden. "They killed him! Holy crap, they killed him!"

Connor leaves the dead pilot in the dust and storms toward the Admiral's plane. He passes the infirmary along the way. Everything's been torn out of there as well. *Risa! Where's Risa?* There are still kids all over the Admiral's jet. The tires have been slashed; wing flaps lean at jagged angles, like broken feathers. The entire jet lists to one side.

"Stop it!" screams Connor. "Stop it now! What are you doing? What have you done?"

He reaches up to the wing, grabs a kid's ankle, and pulls him off onto the ground, but he can't do that to every single one of them. So he grabs a metal pole and smashes it against the wing over and over, the sound ringing out like a church bell, until their attention turns his way.

"Look at you!" he screams. "You've destroyed everything! How could you have done this? You should all be unwound, every single one of you! YOU SHOULD ALL BE UNWOUND!"

It stops everyone. The kids on the wings, the kids at the bonfires. The shock of hearing such words from one of their own snaps them back to sanity. The shock of hearing his own words—and knowing that he meant them—frightens Connor almost as much as the scene before him.

The rolling staircase leading to the Admiral's jet has fallen on its side. "Over here!" says Connor. "Help me with this!"

A dozen kids, their fury spent, come running obediently. Together, they right the stairs, and Connor climbs up to the hatch. He peers in the window. Connor can't see much. The Admiral's there on the floor, but he's not moving. If the Admiral can't get to the door, they'll never be able to get in. Wait—is that someone else in there with him?

Suddenly a lever is thrown on the inside, and the hatch begins to swing open. The heat hits him instantly—a blast furnace of heat—and the face at the door is so red and puffy, it takes a moment for him to realize who it is.

"Risa?"

She coughs and almost collapses into his arms, but manages to keep herself up. "I'm okay," she says. "I'm okay. But the Admiral . . ."

Together they go in and kneel beside him. He's breathing, but it's shallow and strained. "It's the heat!" says Connor, and orders the kids lingering at the door to swing open every hatch.

"It's not just the heat," says Risa. "Look at his lips—they're cyanotic. And his pressure is down to nothing."

Connor just stares at her, not comprehending.

"He's having a heart attack! I've been giving him CPR, but I'm not a doctor. There's only so much I can do!"

"M . . . m. . . my fault," says the Admiral. "My fault . . ."

"Shh," says Connor. "You're going to be okay." But Connor knows, just as he knew when he said it to Cleaver, the chances of that are slim.

They carry the Admiral down the stairs, and as they do, the kids waiting outside back away, making room for him, as if it's already a coffin they're carrying. They set him down in the shade of the wing.

Then kids around them begin to murmur.

"He killed the Goldens," someone says. "The old man deserves what he gets."

Connor boils, but he's gotten much better at keeping his anger in check. "Cleaver did it," Connor says forcefully enough for everyone to hear. That starts a murmur through the crowd, until someone says, "Yeah? Well, what about Emby?"

The Admiral's hand flutters up. "My . . . my son . . ."

"Emby's his *son*?" says one kid, and the rumor begins to spread through the crowd.

Whatever the Admiral meant, it's lost now in incoherence as he slips in and out of consciousness.

“If we don’t get him to a hospital, he’ll die,” says Risa, giving him chest compressions once more.

Connor looks around, but the closest thing to a car on the Graveyard is the golf cart.

“There’s the helicopter,” says Hayden, “but considering the fact that the pilot’s dead, I think we’re screwed.”

Risa looks at Connor. He doesn’t need to read *Risa for Morons* to know what she’s thinking. The pilot is dead—but Cleaver was training another one. “I know what to do,” says Connor. “I’ll take care of it.”

Connor stands up and looks around him—the smoke-stained faces, the smoldering bonfires. After today nothing will be the same. “Hayden,” he says, “you’re in charge. Get everything under control.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Connor leaves Hayden to grapple with authority and finds three of the largest kids in his field of vision. “You, you and you,” Connor says. “I need you to come with me to the FedEx jet.”

The three kids step forward and Connor leads the way to Crate 2399, and Roland. This, Connor knows, will not be an easy conversation.

OceanofPDF.com

47 · First-Year Residents

In her six months working in the emergency room, the young doctor has seen enough strange things to fill her own medical school textbook, but this is the first time someone has crash-landed a helicopter in the hospital parking lot.

She races out with a team of nurses, orderlies, and other doctors. It's a small private craft—four-seater, maybe. It's in one piece, and its blades are still spinning. It missed hitting a parked car by half a yard. Someone's losing their flying license.

Two kids get out, carrying an older man in bad shape. There's already a gurney rolling out to meet them.

"We have a rooftop helipad, you know,"

"He didn't think he'd be able to land on it," says the girl.

When the doctor looks at the pilot, still sitting behind the controls, she realizes that losing his license is not an issue. The kid at the controls can't be any older than seventeen. She hurries to the old man. A stethoscope brings barely a sound from his chest cavity. Turning to the medical staff around her, she says, "Stabilize him, and prep him for transplant." Then she turns back to the kids. "You're lucky you landed at a hospital with a heart bank, or we'd end up having to medevac him across town."

Then the man's hand rises from the gurney. He grabs her sleeve, tugging with more strength than a man in his condition should have.

"No transplant," he says.

No, don't do this to me, thinks the doctor. The orderlies hesitate. "Sir, it's a routine operation."

"He doesn't want a transplant," says the boy.

"You brought him in from God-knows-where with an underage pilot to save his life, and he won't let us do it? We have an entire tissue locker full of healthy young hearts—"

"No transplant!" says the man.

"It's . . . uh . . . against his religion," says the girl.

"Tell you what," says the boy. "Why don't you do whatever they did *before* you had a tissue locker full of healthy young hearts."

The doctor sighs. At least she's still close enough to medical school to remember what that is. "It drastically lowers his chances of survival—you know that, don't you?"

"He knows."

She gives the man a moment more to change his mind, then gives up. The orderlies and other staff rush the man back toward the ER, and the two kids follow.

Once they're gone, she takes a moment to catch her breath. Someone grabs her arm, and she turns to see the young pilot, who had been silent through all of it. The look on his face is pleading, yet determined. She thinks she knows what it's about. She glances at the helicopter, then at the kid. "Take it up with the FAA," she says. "If he lives, I'm sure you'll be off the hook. They might even call you a hero."

"I need you to call the Juvey-cops," he says, his grip getting a little stronger.

"Excuse me?"

"Those two are runaway Unwinds. As soon as the old man is admitted, they'll try to sneak away. Don't let them. Call the Juvey-cops now!"

She pulls out of his grip. "All right. Fine. I'll see what I can do."

"And when they come," he says, "make sure they talk to me first."

She turns from him and heads back into the hospital, pulling out her cell phone on the way. If he wants the Juvey-cops, fine, he'll get them. The sooner they come, the sooner this whole thing can fall into the category of "not my problem."

OceanofPDF.com

48 · Risa

Juvey-cops always look the same. They look tired, they look angry—they look a lot like the Unwinds they capture. The cop who now guards Risa and Connor is no exception. He sits blocking the door of the doctor's office they're being held in, with two more guards on the other side of the door just in case. He's content to stay silent, while another cop questions Roland in an adjacent room. Risa doesn't even want to guess at the topics of conversation in there.

"The man we brought in," Risa says. "How is he?"

"Don't know," says the cop. "You know hospitals—they only tell those things to next of kin, and I guess that's not you."

Risa won't dignify that with a response. She hates this Juvey-cop instinctively, just because of who he is, and what he represents.

"Nice socks," Connor says.

The cop does not glance down at his socks. No show of weakness here. "Nice ears," he says to Connor. "Mind if I try them on sometime?"

The way Risa sees it, there are two types of people who become Juvey-cops. Type one: bullies who want to spend their lives reliving their glory days of high school bullying. Type two: the former victims of type ones, who see every Unwind as the kid who tormented them all those years ago. Type twos are endlessly shoveling vengeance into a pit that will never be full. Amazing that the bullies and victims can now work together to bring misery to others.

"How does it feel to do what you do?" she asks him. "Sending kids to a place that ends their lives."

Obviously he's heard all this before. "How does it feel to live a life no one else feels is worth living?"

It's a harsh blow designed to get her to shut up. It works.

"I feel her life is worth living," says Connor, and he takes her hand. "Anyone feel that way about you?"

It gets to the man—although he tries not to show it. "You both had more than fifteen years to prove yourselves, and you didn't. Don't blame the world for your own lousy choices."

Risa can sense Connor's rage, and she squeezes his hand until she hears him take a deep breath and release it, keeping his anger under control.

"Doesn't it ever occur to you Unwinds that you might be better off—*happier* even—in a divided state?"

"Is that how you rationalize it?" says Risa, "Making yourself believe we'll be happier?"

"Hey, if that's the case," says Connor, "maybe everyone should get unwound. Why don't you go first?"

The cop glares at Connor, then takes a quick glance down at his socks. Connor snickers.

Risa closes her eyes for a moment, trying to see some ray of light in this situation, but she can't. She had known getting caught was a possibility when they came here. She knew that being out in the world was a risk. What surprised her was how quickly the Juvey-cops had descended on them. Even with their unorthodox entrance, they should have had enough time to slip away in the confusion. Whether the Admiral lives or dies, it won't change things for her or for Connor now. They are going to be unwound. All her hopes of a future have been torn away from her again—and having those hopes, even briefly, makes this far more painful than not having had them at all.

OceanofPDF.com

49 · Roland

The Juvey-cop questioning Roland has eyes that don't exactly match, and a sour smell, like his deodorant soap hadn't quite worked. Like his partner in the other room, the man is not easily impressed, and Roland, unlike Connor, doesn't have the wits to rattle him. That's all right, though, because rattling him is not what Roland has in mind.

Roland's plan began to take shape shortly after Connor released him from the crate. He could have torn Connor limb from limb at the time, but Connor had three kids equal in size and strength to Roland to back him up. They were kids who should have been on Roland's side. *Should* have been. It was his first indication that everything had drastically changed.

Connor told him about the riot, and about Cleaver. He offered a lame apology for accusing him of killing the Goldens—an apology that Roland refused to accept. Had Roland been at the riot, it would have been organized and successful. If he had been there, it would have been a revolt, not a riot. By locking Roland away, Connor had robbed him of the chance to lead.

When they had arrived back at the scene of the riot, all focus was on Connor; all questions were directed to him. He was telling everyone what to do, and they were all listening. Even Roland's closest friends cast their eyes down when they saw him. He instinctively knew that all his support was gone. His absence from the disaster had made him an outsider, and he would never regain what he had lost here—which meant it was time to devise a new plan of action.

Roland agreed to fly the helicopter to save the Admiral's life, not because he had any desire to see the man live, but because taking that flight provided a new door of opportunity. . . .

"I'm curious," says the sour-smelling cop. "Why would you turn in the other two kids when it means turning yourself in as well?"

“There’s a reward of five hundred dollars for turning in a runaway Unwind, right?”

He smirks. “Well, that’s fifteen hundred, if you’re including yourself.”

Roland looks the Juvey-cop in the eye—no shame, no fear—and boldly presents his offer. “What if I told you I know where there are more than four hundred AWOL Unwinds? What if I helped you take down a whole smuggling operation? What would that be worth?”

The cop seems to freeze in place, and he regards Roland closely. “All right,” he says. “You have my attention.”

OceanofPDF.com

50 · Connor

He's lasted longer than anyone expected. This is the consolation Connor must hold on to as the cop and two armed guards escort him and Risa into the room where Roland is being interrogated. By the smug look on Roland's face, however, Connor suspects it wasn't so much an interrogation as a negotiation.

"Please, sit down," says the cop sitting on the edge of a desk near Roland. Roland won't look at them. He won't even acknowledge their presence in the room. He just leans back in his chair. He'd fold his arms if the handcuffs allowed it.

The cop wastes no time in getting right to business. "Your friend here had quite a lot to say—and offered us a very interesting deal. His freedom, in exchange for four hundred Unwinds. He's volunteered to tell us exactly where they are."

Connor knew Roland would give him and Risa up, but giving up all of them—that's a new low for Roland. He still won't look at them, but his smug expression seems to have grown a little harder.

"Four hundred, huh?" says the second cop.

"He's lying," says Risa, her voice remarkably convincing. "He's trying to trick you. It's just the three of us."

"Actually," says the cop on the desk, "he's telling the truth—although we're surprised the number's at four hundred. We thought there'd be at least six hundred by now, but I guess they keep on turning eighteen."

Roland regards him, uncertain. "What?"

"Sorry to tell you this, but we know all about the Admiral and the Graveyard," the cop says. "We've known about it for more than a year."

The second cop chuckles, amused by the dumbfounded look on Roland's face. "But . . . but . . ."

"But why don't we round them up?" says the cop, anticipating Roland's question. "Look at it this way. The Admiral—he's like that

neighborhood stray cat that nobody likes but no one wants to get rid of because he takes care of the rats. See, runaway Unwinds on the street—that's a problem for us. But the Admiral gets them off the street and keeps them in that little desert ghetto of his. He doesn't know it, but he's doing us a favor. No more rats."

"Of course," says the second cop, "if the old man dies, we may have to go in there and clean the place out after all."

"No!" says Risa. "Someone else can take over!"

The second cop shrugs as if it's nothing to him. "Better be a good mouser."

While Roland can only stare incredulously as his plan crumbles, Connor feels relief, and maybe even a bit of hope. "So, then you'll let us go back?"

The cop on the desk picks up a file. "I'm afraid I can't do that. It's one thing to look the other way, but quite another to release a criminal." Then he begins to read. "Connor Lassiter. Scheduled to be unwound the 21st of November—until you went AWOL. You caused an accident that killed a bus driver, left dozens of others injured, and shut down an interstate highway for hours. Then, on top of it, you took a hostage *and* shot a Juvey-cop with his own tranq gun."

Roland looks at the cop in awe. "*He's* the Akron AWOL?!"

Connor glances at Risa, then back at the cop. "Fine. I admit it. But she had nothing to do with it! Let her go!"

The cop shakes his head, scanning the file. "Witnesses say she was an accomplice. I'm afraid there's only one place she's going. Same place as you: the nearest harvest camp."

"But what about me?" asks Roland. "I had nothing to do with any of that!"

The cop closes the file. "Ever hear of 'guilt by association'?" he asks Roland. "You should be more careful with the company you keep." Then he signals for the guards to take all three of them away.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Six

Unwound

For your ease and peace of mind, there are a variety of harvest camps to choose from. Each facility is privately owned, state licensed, and federally funded by your tax dollars. Regardless of the site you choose, you can feel confident that your Unwind will receive the finest possible care from our board-certified staff as they make their transition to a divided state.

—From *The Parents' Unwinding Handbook*

OceanofPDF.com

51 · Camp

On the existence of a soul, whether unwound or unborn, people are likely to debate for hours on end, but no one questions whether an unwinding facility has a soul. It does not. Perhaps that's why those who build these massive medical factories try so hard to make them kid-conscious and user-friendly, in a number of ways.

First of all, they are no longer called unwinding facilities, as they were when they were first conceived. They are now called harvest camps.

Secondly, every single one of them is located in a spectacularly scenic location, perhaps to remind its guests of the big picture, and the reassuring majesty of a larger plan.

Third, the grounds are as well maintained as a resort, filled with bright pastel colors and as little red as possible, since red is psychologically associated with anger, aggression, and, not coincidentally, blood.

Happy Jack Harvest Camp, in beautiful Happy Jack, Arizona, is the perfect model of what a harvest camp should be. Nestled on a pine-covered ridge in northern Arizona, the sedating forest views give way to the breathtaking red mountains of Sedona to the west. No doubt it was the view that made happy men of the twentieth century lumberjacks who founded the town. Hence the name.

The boys' dormitory is painted light blue, with green accents. The girls' is lavender, with pink. The staff have uniforms that consist of comfortable shorts and Hawaiian shirts, except for the surgeons in the medical unit. Their scrubs are sunshine yellow.

There's a barbed-wire fence, but it's hidden behind a towering hibiscus hedge—and although the Unwinds in residence see the crowded buses arriving at the front gate each day, they are spared the sight of departing trucks. Those leave the back way.

The average stay for an Unwind is three weeks, although it varies depending on blood type and supply and demand. Much like life in the outside world, no one knows when it's their time.

Occasionally, in spite of the professional and positive attitude of the staff, outbursts do occur. This week's rebellion is in the form of graffiti on the side of the medical clinic that reads, YOU'RE NOT FOOLING ANYONE.

* * *

On the fourth of February, three kids arrive by police escort. Two are brought unceremoniously into the welcome center, just like any other arriving Unwinds. The third is singled out to take the longer route that passes by the dormitories, the sports fields, and all the various places where Unwinds are gathered.

Hobbled by leg shackles, constricted by handcuffs, Connor's strides are short, his posture hunched. Armed Juveycops are on either side, in front of and behind him.

All things at Happy Jack are serene and gracious—but this moment is the exception to the rule. Once in a while, a particularly troublesome Unwind is singled out and publicly humbled for all to see before being set loose into the general population. Invariably, that Unwind will try to rebel and, invariably, that Unwind will be taken to the clinic and unwound within just a few days of his or her arrival.

It stands as an unspoken warning to every Unwind there. You will get with the program, or your stay here will be very, very short. The lesson is always learned.

However, this time, what the Happy Jack staff doesn't know is that Connor Lassiter's reputation has preceded him. The staff's own announcement that they've taken down the Akron AWOL does not deflate the spirits of the Unwinds there. Instead, it takes a boy who was only a rumor and turns him into a legend.

OceanofPDF.com

52 · Risa

"Before we begin our session, I feel it's important to remind you that although you've developed a friendship with the so-called Akron AWOL, it's in your best interests to dissociate yourself from him."

The first thing they did was to separate the three of them. Divide and conquer, isn't that the term? Risa has no problem being separated from Roland, but seeing what they did to Connor makes her long to see him even more. Physically, he was not harmed in any way. It would not do to damage the merchandise. Psychologically, however, that's a different story. They paraded him through the grounds for nearly twenty minutes. Then they took off his shackles and just left him there by the flagpole. No trip to the "welcome center," no orientation, nothing. He was left to figure everything out for himself. Risa knew the point wasn't to challenge him, or even to punish him. It was to give him every opportunity to do the wrong thing. That way, they could justify any punishment they gave. It had worried Risa, but only for a moment—because she knows Connor all too well. He will only do the wrong thing when it's the right thing to do.

"It looks like you did very well on the aptitude tests, Risa—above average, actually. Good for you!"

After being there for half a day, Risa is still shell-shocked by the general appearance of Happy Jack Harvest Camp. In her mind's eye she always pictured harvest camps as human cattle stockades: dead-eyed crowds of malnourished kids in small gray cells—a nightmare of dehumanization. Yet somehow this picturesque nightmare is worse. Just as the airplane graveyard was Heaven disguised as Hell, harvest camp is Hell masquerading as Heaven.

"You seem to be in good physical condition. You've been getting a lot of exercise, yes? Running, perhaps?"

Exercise seems to be a principal component of the Unwind's day. At first she assumed the various activities were designed to keep the Unwinds occupied until their number came up. Then, as she passed a

basketball game on the way to the welcome center, she noticed a totem pole by the court. In the eyes of each of the five totems were cameras. Ten players, ten cameras. It meant that someone, somewhere, was studying each of the Unwinds in that game, taking notes on eye-hand coordination, gauging the strengths of various muscle groups. Risa had quickly realized that the basketball game wasn't to keep the Unwinds entertained, but to help put a cash value on their parts.

"Over the next few weeks you'll be involved in a program of diverse activities. Risa, dear, are you listening? Is any of this going over your head—would you like me to slow down?"

The harvest counselor who interviews her seems to assume that, in spite of aptitude scores, every Unwind must be an imbecile. The woman wears a floral print blouse with lots of leaves and pink flowers. Risa would like to attack her with a weed whacker.

"Do you have any questions or concerns, dear? If you do, there's no better time to ask."

"What happens to the bad parts?"

The question seems to throw the woman off stride. "Excuse me?"

"You know—the bad parts. What do you do with the club feet, and the deaf ears? Do you use those in transplants?"

"You don't have either of those, do you?"

"No—but I do have an appendix. What happens to that?"

"Well," says the counselor with near infinite patience, "a deaf ear is better than no ear at all, and sometimes it's all people can afford. And as for your appendix, nobody really needs that anyway."

"Then, aren't you breaking the law? Doesn't the law specify that you have to keep 100 percent of an Unwind alive?"

The smile has begun to fade from the counselor's face. "Well, actually it's 99.44 percent, which takes into account things like the appendix."

"I see."

"Our next bit of business is your preadmission questionnaire. Due to your unorthodox arrival, you never had the opportunity to fill one out." She flips through the pages of the questionnaire. "Most of the

questions don't matter at this point . . . but if you have any special skills you'd like to let us know about—you know, things that could be of use to the community during your stay here . . ."

Risa wishes she could just get up and leave. Even now, at the end of her life, she still has to face that inevitable question, *What good are you?*

"I have some medical experience," Risa tells her flatly. "First aid, CPR."

The woman smiles apologetically. "Well, if there's one thing we have too many of here, it's medical staff." If the woman says "well" one more time, Risa may just drop her down a nice deep one. "Anything else?"

"I helped in the infant nursery back at StaHo."

Again that slim smile. "Sorry. No babies here. Is that all?"

Risa sighs. "I also studied classical piano."

The woman's eyebrows raise about an inch. "Really? You play piano? Well, well, well!"

OceanofPDF.com

53 · Connor

Connor wants to fight. He wants to mistreat the staff and disobey every rule, because he knows if he does, it will get this over with faster. But he won't give in to the urge for two reasons. One: It's exactly what they want him to do. And two: Risa. He knows how it will devastate her to see him led to the Chop Shop. That's what the kids call it, "the Chop Shop"—although they never say it in front of the staff.

Connor is a celebrity in his dormitory. He finds it absurd and surreal that the kids here see him as some sort of symbol, when all he did was survive.

"It can't be all true, right?" the kid who sleeps in the bed next to his asks the first night. "I mean, you didn't *really* take on an entire squad of Juvey-cops with their own tranq guns."

"No! It's not true," Connor tells him, but denying it just makes the kid believe it even more.

"They didn't *really* shut down entire freeways looking for you," another kid says.

"It was just one freeway—and they didn't shut it down. I did. Sort of."

"So, then it is true!"

It's no use—no amount of downplaying the story can convince the others that the Akron AWOL is not some larger-than-life action figure.

And then there's Roland, who as much as he despises Connor, is now riding Connor's fame wave for all it's worth. Although Roland's in another unit, wild stories are already getting back to Connor about how he and Roland stole a helicopter and liberated a hundred Unwinds being held in a Tucson hospital. Connor considers telling them that all Roland did was turn them in, but decides life is literally too short to start things up with Roland again.

There's one kid Connor speaks to who actually listens and can tell the truth from the fabrications. His name is Dalton. He's seventeen

but short and stocky, with hair that has a mind of its own. Connor tells him exactly what happened on that day he went AWOL. It's a relief to have someone believe the truth. Dalton, however, has his own perspective on it.

"Even if that's all that happened," Dalton says, "it's still pretty impressive. It's what the rest of us *wish* we could have done."

Connor has to admit that he's right.

"You're, like, king of the Unwinds here," Dalton tells him, "but guys like you get unwound real quick—so watch yourself." Then Dalton takes a long look at him. "You scared?" he asks.

Connor wishes he could tell him different, but he won't lie. "Yeah."

He seems almost relieved that Connor's scared too. "In group they tell us that the fear will pass and we'll get to a place of acceptance. I've been here almost six months, and I'm just as scared as the day I got here."

"Six months? I thought everyone goes down in just a few weeks."

Dalton leans in close and whispers, as if it's dangerous information. "Not if you're in the band."

A band? The thought of there being music at a place where lives are silenced doesn't sit well with Connor.

"They set us up on the roof of the Chop Shop and have us play while they're bringing kids in," Dalton says. "We play everything—classics, pop, Old World rock. I'm the best bass player this place has ever seen." And then he grins. "You should come listen to us tomorrow. We just got a new keyboard player. She's hot."

* * *

Volleyball in the morning. Connor's first official activity. Several staffers in their rainbow of flowered shirts stand on the sidelines with clipboards, because apparently the volleyball court isn't equipped with twelve individual cameras. From behind them, on the roof of the chop shop, music plays. Dalton's band. It's their sound track for the morning.

The opposing team completely deflates when they see Connor, as if his mere presence will ensure their loss. Never mind that Connor

stinks at volleyball; to them the Akron AWOL is a star in every sport. Roland's on the opposing team as well. He doesn't wilt like the others—he just glares, holding the volleyball, ready to serve it down Connor's throat.

The game begins. The intensity of play can only be matched by an undercurrent of fear that runs beneath every tap of the ball. Both teams play as if the losers will be immediately unwound. Dalton had told Connor that it doesn't work that way, but losing can't help, either. It reminds Connor of the Mayan game of pokatok—something he learned about in history class. The game was a lot like basketball, except that the losers were sacrificed to the Mayan gods. At the time Connor thought it was cool.

Roland spikes the ball, and it hits one of the staffers in the face. Roland grins before he apologizes and the man glares at him, making a note on his clipboard. Connor wonders if it will cost Roland a few days.

Then suddenly, the game pauses, because everyone's attention begins to shift to a group of kids in white, passing the far side of the court.

"Those are tithes," a kid tells Connor. "You know what those are, right?"

Connor nods. "I know."

"Look at them. They think they're so much better than everyone else."

Connor has already heard how tithes are treated differently than the regular population. "Tithes" and "Terribles," that's how the staff refers to the two kinds of Unwinds. Tithes don't participate in the same activities as the terribles. They don't wear the same blue and pink uniforms the terribles wear. Their white silk outfits are so bright in the Arizona sun, you have to squint your eyes when you look at them, like they were adolescent versions of God himself—although to Connor they look more like a little squad of aliens. The terribles hate the tithes the way peasants despise royalty. Connor might have once felt the same way, but having known one, he feels more sorry for them than anything else.

“I hear they know the exact date and time of their unwinding,” one kid says.

“I hear they actually make their own *appointment*!” says another.

The ref blows his whistle, “All right, back to the game.”

They turn away from the bright white uniforms of the chosen few, and add one more layer of frustration to the match.

For a moment, as the tithes disappear over a hillside, Connor thinks that he recognizes a face among them, but he knows it’s just his imagination.

OceanofPDF.com

54 · Lev

It's not Connor's imagination.

Levi Jedediah Calder is one of the very special guests of Happy Jack Harvest Camp, and he is wearing his tithing whites once more. He does not see Connor on the volleyball court because the tithes are strictly instructed not to look at the terribles. Why should they? They have been told from birth they are of a different caste and have a higher calling.

Lev may still have the remnants of a sunburn, but his hair is cut short and neat, just as it used to be, and his manner is sensitive and mild. At least on the outside.

He has an appointment for unwinding in thirteen days.

OceanofPDF.com

55 · Risa

She plays on the roof of the Chop Shop, and her music carries across the fields to the ears of more than a thousand souls waiting to go under the knife. The joy of having her fingers on the keys again can only be matched by the horror of knowing what's going on beneath her feet.

From her vantage point on the roof she sees them brought down the maroon flagstone path that all the kids call "the red carpet." Kids who walk the red carpet have guards flanking them on either side, with firm grips on their upper arms—firm enough to restrain them, but not enough to bruise them.

Yet in spite of this, Dalton and the rest of his band play like it doesn't matter at all.

"How can you do this?" she asks during one of their breaks. "How can you watch them day after day, going in and never coming out?"

"You get used to it," the drummer tells her, taking a swig of water. "You'll see."

"I won't! I can't!" She thinks about Connor. He doesn't have this same reprieve from unwinding. He doesn't stand a chance. "I can't be an accomplice to what they're doing!"

"Hey," says Dalton, getting annoyed. "This is survival here, and we do what we have to do to survive! You got chosen because you can play, and you're good. Don't throw it away. Either you get used to kids walking down the red carpet or you'll be on it yourself, and we'll have to play for *you*."

Risa gets the message, but it doesn't mean she has to like it. "Is that what happened to your last keyboard player?" Risa asks. She can tell it's a subject they'd rather not think about. They look at one another. No one wants to take on the question. Then the lead singer answers with a nonchalant toss of her hair, like it doesn't matter. "Jack was about to turn eighteen, so they took him a week before his birthday."

“He was not a very happy Jack,” says the drummer, and hits a rim shot.

“That’s it?” says Risa. “They just took him?”

“Business is business,” says the lead singer. “They lose a ton of money if one of us turns eighteen, because then they’ve got to let us go.”

“I’ve got a plan, though,” says Dalton, winking at the others, who have obviously heard this before. “When I’m getting close to eighteen, and they’re ready to come for me, I’m jumping right off this roof.”

“You’re going to kill yourself?”

“I hope not—it’s only two stories, but I’ll sure get busted up real bad. See, they can’t unwind you like that; they have to wait until you heal. By then I’ll be eighteen and they will be *screwed*!” He high-fives the drummer, and they laugh. Risa can only stare in disbelief.

“Personally,” says the lead singer, “I’m counting on them lowering the legal age of adulthood to seventeen. If they do, I’ll go to the staffers and counselors, and the friggin’ doctors. I’ll spit right in their faces—and they won’t be able to do anything but let me walk right out that gate on my own two legs.”

Then the guitar player, who hasn’t said a word all morning, picks up his instrument.

“This one’s for Jack,” he says, and begins playing the opening chords to the prewar classic “Don’t Fear the Reaper.”

The rest of them join in, playing from the heart, and Risa does her best to keep her eyes away from the red carpet.

OceanofPDF.com

56 · Connor

The dormitories are divided into units. There are thirty kids per unit—thirty beds in a long, thin room with large shatterproof windows to bring in the cheerful light of day. As Connor prepares for dinner he notices that two beds in his unit have been stripped, and the kids who slept in them are nowhere to be seen. Everyone notices but no one talks about it, except one kid who takes one of the bunks because his mattress has broken springs.

"Let a newbie have the broken one," he says. "I'm gonna be comfortable my last week."

Conner can't remember either the names or the faces of the missing kids, and that haunts him. The whole day weighs heavily on him—the way the kids think he can somehow save them, when he knows he can't even save himself. The way the staff keeps waiting for him to make a mistake. His one joy is knowing that Risa is safe, at least for now.

He had seen her after lunch when he stopped to watch the band. He had been searching for her everywhere, and all that time she was right there in plain view, playing her heart out. She had told him she played piano, but he never gave it much thought. She's amazing, and now he wishes he had taken more time to get to know who she was before she escaped from that bus. When she saw him watching that afternoon, she smiled—something she rarely did. But the smile was quickly replaced by a look that registered the reality. She was up there, and he was down here.

Connor spends so much time with his thoughts in the dormitory that, when he looks up, he realizes that everyone in the unit has already left for dinner. As he gets up to leave, he sees someone lurking at the door and stops short. It's Roland.

"You're not supposed to be here," Connor says.

"No, I'm not," says Roland, "but thanks to you, I am."

"That's not what I mean. If you get caught out of your unit, it's a mark against you. They'll unwind you sooner."

"Nice of you to care."

Connor heads for the doorway, but Roland blocks his path. For the first time Connor notices that in spite of Roland's muscular build, they're not all that different in height. Connor always thought Roland towered over him. He doesn't. Connor prepares himself for whatever Roland might have up his sleeve and says, "If you're here for a reason, get on with it. Otherwise, step aside so I can get to dinner."

The look on Roland's face is so toxic it could take out an entire unit. "I could have killed you a dozen times. I should have—because then we wouldn't be here."

"You turned us in at the hospital," Connor reminds him. "If *you* hadn't done *that*, we wouldn't be here. We all would've made it safely back to the Graveyard!"

"What Graveyard? There's nothing left. You locked me in that crate and let them all destroy it! I would have stopped it, but you never gave me the chance!"

"If you were there, you would have found a way to kill the Admiral yourself. Hell, you would have killed the Goldens if they weren't already dead! That's what you are! That's *who* you are!"

Roland suddenly gets very quiet, and Connor knows he's gone too far.

"Well, if I'm a killer, I'm running out of time," says Roland. "I better get to it." He begins swinging, and Connor is quick to defend, but soon it's more than just defending himself. Connor taps into his own wellspring of fury, and he lets loose a brutal offensive of his own.

It's the fight they never had in the warehouse. It's the fight Roland wanted when he had cornered Risa in the bathroom. Both of them fuel their fists with a world's worth of anger. They smash against walls and bedframes, relentlessly pummeling each other. Connor knows this is not like any fight he's ever had before, and although Roland doesn't have a weapon, he doesn't need one. He's his own weapon.

As well as Connor fights, Roland is simply stronger, and as Connor's strength begins to fade, Roland grabs him by the throat and slams him

against the wall, his hand pressed against Connor's windpipe. Connor struggles, but Roland's grip is way too strong. He slams Connor against the wall over and over, never loosening that grip on his neck.

"You call me a killer, but you're the only criminal here!" screams Roland. "I didn't take a hostage! I didn't shoot a Juveycop! And I never killed anyone! Until now!" Then he squeezes his fingers together and shuts off Connor's windpipe completely.

Connor's struggles become weaker without oxygen to feed his muscles. His chest heaves against the absence of air, and his vision begins to darken until all he can see is Roland's furious grimace. *Would you rather die, or be unwound?* Now he finally knows the answer. Maybe this is what he wanted. Maybe it's why he stood there and taunted Roland. Because he'd rather be killed with a furious hand than dismembered with cool indifference.

Connor's eyesight fills with frantic squiggles, the darkness closes in, and his consciousness fails.

But only for an instant.

Because in a moment his head hits the ground, startling him conscious again—and when his vision starts to clear he sees Roland looking down on him. He's just standing there, staring. To Connor's amazement, there are tears in Roland's eyes that he tries to hide behind his anger, but they're still there. Roland looks at the hand that came so close to taking Connor's life. He wasn't able to go through with it—and he seems just as surprised as Connor.

"Consider yourself lucky," Roland says. Then he leaves without another word.

Connor can't tell whether Roland is disappointed or relieved that he's not the killer he thought he was, but Connor suspects it's a little bit of both.

OceanofPDF.com

57 · Lev

The tithes at Happy Jack are like first-class passengers on the *Titanic*. There's plush furniture throughout the tithing house. There's a theater, a pool, and the food is better than homemade. Sure, their fate is the same as the "terribles," but at least they're getting there in style.

It's after dinner, and Lev is alone in the tithing house workout room. He stands on a treadmill that isn't moving, because he hasn't turned it on. On his feet are thickly padded running shoes. He wears a double pair of socks to cushion his feet even more. However, his feet are not his concern at the moment—it's his hands. He stands there staring at his hands, lost in the prospect of them. Never before has he been so intrigued by the lines across his palms. Isn't one of them supposed to be a life line? Shouldn't the life line of a tithe divide out like the branches of a tree? Lev looks at the swirls of his fingerprints. What a nightmare of identification it must be when other people get an Unwind's hands. What can fingerprints mean when they're not necessarily yours?

No one will be getting Lev's fingerprints. He knows this for a fact.

There are tons of activities for the tithes, but unlike the terribles, no one is forced to participate. Part of preparation for tithing is a monthlong regimen of mental and physical assessments even before one's tithing party, so all the hard work is done at home, before they get here. True, this isn't the harvest camp he and his parents had chosen, but he's a tithe—it's a lifetime pass that's good anywhere.

Most of the other tithes are in the rec room at this time of the evening, or in any number of prayer groups. There are pastors of all faiths in the tithing house—ministers, priests, rabbis, and clerics—because that notion of giving the finest of the flock back to God is a tradition as old as religion itself.

Lev attends as often as necessary, and in Bible study he says just enough of the right things so as not to look suspect. He also keeps his

silence when Bible passages become shredded to justify unwinding, and kids start to see the face of God in the fragments.

"My uncle got the heart of a tithe and now people say he can perform miracles."

"I know this woman who got a tithe's ear. She heard a baby crying a block away, and rescued it from a fire!"

"We are Holy Communion."

"We are manna from Heaven."

"We are the piece of God in everyone."

Amen.

Lev recites prayers, trying to let them transform him and lift him up like they used to, but his heart has been hardened. He wishes it could be hard enough to be diamond instead of crumbling jade—maybe then he'd have chosen a different path. But for who he is now, for what he feels and what he doesn't feel, the path is right. And if it's not right, well, he doesn't care enough to change it.

The other tithes know Lev is different. They've never seen a fallen tithe before, much less one who, like the prodigal son, has renounced his sins and returned to the fold. But then, tithes don't generally know many other tithes. Being surrounded by so many kids just like them feeds that sense of being a chosen group. Still, Lev is outside of that circle.

He turns the treadmill on, making sure his strides are steady and his footfalls as gentle as can be. The treadmill is state-of-the-art. It has a screen with a programmable vista: You can jog through the woods, or run the New York Marathon. You can even walk on water. Lev was prescribed extra exercise when he arrived a week ago. That first day, his blood tests showed high triglyceride levels. He's sure that Mai's and Blaine's blood tests showed the same problem as well—although the three of them were "captured" independently and arrived a few days apart from one another, so no connection among the three of them could be made.

"Either it runs in your family or you've had a diet high in fats," the doctor had said. He prescribed a low-fat diet during his stay at Happy Jack, and suggested additional exercise. Lev knows there's another

reason for the high triglyceride level. It's not actually triglyceride in his bloodstream at all, but a similar compound. One that's a little less stable.

Another boy enters the workout room. He has fine hair so blond it's practically white, and eyes so green, there must have been some genetic manipulation involved. Those eyes will go for a high price. "Hi, Lev." He gets on the treadmill next to Lev and begins running. "What's up?"

"Nothing. Just running."

Lev knows the kid didn't come here of his own accord. Tithes are never supposed to be left alone. He was sent here to be Lev's buddy.

"Candlelighting will be starting soon. Are you coming?"

Every evening, a candle is lit for each tithe being unwound the next day. The honored kids each give a speech. Everyone applauds. Lev finds it disgusting.

"I'll be there," Lev tells the kid.

"Have you started working on your speech yet?" he asks. "I'm almost done with mine."

"Mine's still in bits and pieces," Lev says. The joke goes over the kid's head. Lev turns off the machine. This kid will not leave him alone as long as he's here, and Lev really doesn't want to talk to him about the glory of being a chosen one. He'd rather think about those who aren't chosen, and are lucky enough to be far from the harvest camp—like Risa and Connor, who to the best of his knowledge are still in the sanctuary of the Graveyard. It's a big comfort to know that their lives will continue even after he's gone.

* * *

There's an old trash shed behind the dining room that's no longer in use. Lev found it last week, and decided it was the perfect place for secret meetings. When he arrives that evening, Mai is pacing in the small space. She's been getting more and more nervous each day. "How long are we going to wait?" she asks.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Lev asks. "We'll wait until the time is right."

Blaine pulls out six small paper packets from his sock, tears one open, and pulls out a little round Band-Aid.

"What's that for?" Mai asks.

"For me to know and for you to find out."

"You're so immature!"

Mai always has a short fuse, especially when it comes to Blaine, but tonight there seems to be more rumbling beneath the surface of her attitude. "What's wrong, Mai?" Lev asks.

Mai takes a moment before answering. "I saw this girl today playing piano on the Chop Shop roof. I know her from the Graveyard—and she knows me."

"That's impossible. If she's from the Graveyard, why would she be here?" asks Blaine.

"I know what I saw—and I think there are other kids here I know from the Graveyard too. What if they recognize us?"

Blaine and Mai look to Lev as if he can explain it. Actually, he can. "They must be kids who were sent out on a job and got caught, that's all."

Mai relaxes. "Yeah. Yeah, that must be it."

"If they recognize us," says Blaine, "we can say the same thing happened to us."

"There," says Lev. "Problem solved."

"Good," says Blaine. "Back to business. So . . . I'm thinking we go for the day after tomorrow, on account of I'm scheduled for a game of football the day after that, and I don't think it'll go very well."

Then he hands two of the little Band-Aids to Mai and two to Lev.

"What do we need Band-Aids for?" Mai asks.

"I was told to give these to you after we got here." Blaine dangles one from his fingers, like a little flesh-colored leaf. "They're not Band-Aids," he says. "They're detonators."

* * *

There was never a job on an Alaskan pipeline. After all, what Unwind would volunteer for such a job? The whole point was to make sure no one but Lev, Mai, and Blaine volunteered. Their van had taken them

from the Graveyard to a run-down house, in a run-down neighborhood where people who had been run down by life plotted unthinkable deeds.

Lev was terrified of these people, and yet he felt a kinship with them. They understood the misery of being betrayed by life. They understood what it felt like to have less than nothing inside you. And when they told Lev how important he was in the scheme of things, Lev felt, for the first time in a long time, truly important.

The word "evil" was never used by these people—except to describe the evils of what the world had done to them. What they were asking Lev, Mai, and Blaine to do wasn't evil—no, no, no, not at all. It was an expression of all the things they felt inside. It was the spirit, and the nature, and the manifestation of all they had become. They weren't just messengers, they were the message. This is what they filled Lev's mind with, and it was no different than the deadly stuff they filled his blood with. It was twisted. It was wrong. And yet it suited Lev just fine.

"We have no cause but chaos," Cleaver, their recruiter, was always so fond of saying. What Cleaver never realized, even at the end of his life, is that chaos is as compelling a cause as any other. It can even become a religion to those unlucky enough to be baptized into it, those whose consolation can only be found in its foul waters.

Lev does not know of Cleaver's fate. He does not know, or care, that he himself is being used. All Lev knows is that someday soon the world will suffer a small part of the loss and the emptiness and the utter disillusionment he feels inside. And they will know the moment he raises his hands in applause.

OceanofPDF.com

58 · Connor

Connor eats his breakfast as quickly as he can. It's not because he's hungry but because he has somewhere else he wants to be. Risa's breakfast hour is right before his. If she's slow, and he's quick, they can force their paths to cross without attracting the attention of the Happy Jack staff.

They meet in the girls' bathroom. The last time they were forced to meet in a place like this, they took separate, isolated stalls. Now they share one. They hold each other in the tight space, making no excuses for it. There's no time left in their lives for games, or for awkwardness, or for pretending they don't care about each other, and so they kiss as if they've done it forever. As if it is as crucial as the need for oxygen.

She touches the bruises on his face and neck, the ones he got from his fight with Roland. She asks what happened. He tells her it's not important. She tells him she can't stay much longer, that Dalton and the other band members will be waiting for her on the Chop Shop roof.

"I heard you play," Connor tells her. "You're amazing."

He kisses her again. They don't speak of unwinding. In this moment none of that exists. Connor knows they would take this further if they could—but not here, not in a place like this. It will never happen for them, but somehow he's content in knowing that in some other place and time it would have. He holds her for ten seconds, twenty. Thirty. Then she slips away, and he returns to the dining hall. In a few minutes he hears her playing, the strains of her music pouring forth, filling Happy Jack with the upbeat, pulse-pounding sound track of the damned.

OceanofPDF.com

59 · Roland

They come for Roland that same morning, right after breakfast. A harvest counselor and two guards corner him in the dormitory hallway, isolating him from the others.

"You don't want me," Roland says desperately. "I'm not the Akron AWOL; Connor's the one you want."

"I'm afraid not," says the counselor.

"But . . . but I've only been here a few days. . . ." He knows why this happened. It's because he hit that guy with the volleyball, that must be it. Or it's because of his fight with Connor. Connor turned him in! He knew Connor would turn him in!

"It's your blood type," the counselor says. "AB negative—it's rare and in very high demand." He smiles. "Think of it this way, you're worth more than any other kid in your unit."

"Lucky you," says one of the guards as he grabs Roland by the arm.

"If it's any consolation," says the counselor, "your friend Connor is scheduled for unwinding this afternoon."

* * *

Roland's legs feel weak as they bring him out into the light of day. The red carpet stretches out before him, the color of dried blood. Any time kids cross that terrible stone path, they always jump over it as if touching it were bad luck. Now they won't let Roland step off of it.

"I want a priest," says Roland. "They give people priests, right? I want a priest!"

"Priests give last rites," says the counselor, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "That's for people who are dying. You're not dying—you'll still be alive, just in a different way."

"I still want a priest."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do."

The band on the roof of the Chop Shop has begun their morning set. They play a familiar dance tune, as if to mock the dirge playing inside his head. He knows Risa is in the band now. He sees her up there playing the keyboard. He knows she hates him but still he waves to her, trying get her attention. Even an acknowledgment from someone who hates him is better than having no one but strangers watch him perish.

She doesn't turn her eyes toward the red carpet. She doesn't see him. She doesn't know. Perhaps someone will tell her he was unwound today. He wonders what she'll feel.

They've reached the end of the red carpet. There are five stone steps leading to the doors of the Chop Shop. Roland stops at the bottom of the steps. The guards try to pull him along, but he shakes them off.

"I need more time. Another day. That's all. One more day. I'll be ready tomorrow. I promise!"

And still, above him, the band plays. He wants to scream, but here, so close to the Chop Shop, his screams will be drowned out by the band. The counselor signals to the guards. They grab him more firmly just beneath the armpits, forcing him to take those five steps. In a moment he's through the doors, which slide closed behind him, shutting out the world. He can't even hear the band anymore. The Chop Shop is soundproof. Somehow he knew it would be.

OceanofPDF.com

60 · Harvest

No one knows how it happens. No one knows how it's done. The harvesting of Unwinds is a secret medical ritual that stays within the walls of each harvesting clinic in the nation. In this way it is not unlike death itself, for no one knows what mysteries lie beyond those secret doors, either.

What does it take to unwind the unwanted? It takes twelve surgeons, in teams of two, rotating in and out as their medical specialty is needed. It takes nine surgical assistants and four nurses. It takes three hours.

OceanofPDF.com

61 · Roland

Roland is fifteen minutes in.

The medical staff that buzz around him wear scrubs the color of a happy-face.

His arms and legs have been secured to the operating table with bonds that are strong but padded so he won't hurt himself if he struggles.

A nurse blots sweat from his forehead. "Relax, I'm here to help you through this."

He feels a sharp pinprick in the right side of his neck, and then in the left side.

"What's that?"

"That," says the nurse, "is the only pain you'll be feeling today."

"This is it, then," Roland says. "You're putting me under?"

Although he can't see her mouth beneath her surgical mask, he can see the smile in her eyes.

"Not at all," she says. "By law, we're required to keep you conscious through the entire procedure." The nurse takes his hand. "You have a right to know everything that's happening to you, every step of the way."

"What if I don't want to?"

"You will," says one of the surgical assistants, wiping Roland's legs down with brown surgical scrub. "Everybody does."

"We've just inserted catheters into your carotid artery and jugular vein," says the nurse. "Right now your blood is being replaced with a synthetic oxygen-rich solution."

"We send the real stuff straight to the blood bank," says the assistant at his feet. "Not a bit gets wasted. You can bet, you'll be saving lives!"

"The oxygen solution also contains an anaesthetic that deadens pain receptors." The nurse pats his hand. "You'll be fully conscious,

but you won't feel a thing."

Already Roland feels his limbs starting to go numb. He swallows hard. "I hate this. I hate you. I hate all of you."

"I understand."

* * *

Twenty-eight minutes in.

The first set of surgeons has arrived.

"Don't mind them," says the nurse. "Talk to me."

"What do we talk about?"

"Anything you want."

Someone drops an instrument. It clatters on the table and falls to the floor. Roland flinches. The nurse holds his hand tighter.

"You may feel a tugging sensation near your ankles," says one of the surgeons at the foot of the table. "It's nothing to worry about."

* * *

Forty-five minutes in.

So many surgeons, so much activity. Roland couldn't remember ever having so much attention directed at him. He wants to look, but the nurse holds his focus. She's read his file. She knows everything about him. The good and the bad. The things he never talks about. The things he can't stop talking about now.

"I think it's horrible what your stepfather did."

"I was just protecting my mother."

"Scalpel," says a surgeon.

"She should have been grateful."

"She had me unwound."

"I'm sure it wasn't easy for her."

"All right, clamp it off."

* * *

An hour and fifteen.

Surgeons leave, new ones arrive. The new ones take an intense interest in his abdomen. He looks toward his toes but can't see them.

Instead he sees a surgical assistant cleaning the lower half of the table.

"I almost killed a kid yesterday."

"That doesn't matter now."

"I wanted to do it, but I got scared. I don't know why, but I got scared."

"Just let it go." The nurse was holding his hand before. She's not anymore.

"Strong abdominal muscles," says a doctor. "Do you work out?"

A clanging of metal. The lower half of the table is unhooked and pulled away. It makes him think of when he was twelve and his mom took him to Las Vegas. She had dropped him off at a magic show while she played the slots. The magician had cut a woman in half. Her toes were still wiggling, her face still smiling. The audience gave him thunderous applause.

Now Roland feels discomfort in his gut. Discomfort, a tickling sensation, but no pain. The surgeons lift things away. He tries not to look, but he can't help it. There's no blood, just the oxygen-rich solution, which is flourescent green, like antifreeze.

"I'm scared," he says.

"I know," says the nurse.

"I want you all to go to Hell."

"That's natural."

One team leaves; another comes in. They take an intense interest in his chest.

* * *

An hour forty-five.

"I'm afraid we need to stop talking now."

"Don't go away."

"I'll be here, but we won't be able to talk anymore."

The fear surrounds him, threatening to take him under. He tries to replace it with anger, but the fear is too strong. He tries to replace it with the satisfaction that Connor will be taken very soon, but not even that makes him feel better.

"You'll feel a tingling in your chest," says a surgeon. "It's nothing to worry about."

* * *

Two hours, five minutes.

"Blink twice if you can hear me."

Blink, blink.

"You're being very brave."

He tries to think of other things, other places, but his mind keeps being drawn back to this place. Everyone's so close around him now. Yellow figures lean all around him like flower petals closing in. Another section of the table is taken away. The petals move in closer. He does not deserve this. He has done many things, not all good, but he does not deserve this. And he never did get his priest.

* * *

Two hours, twenty minutes.

"You'll feel a tingling in your jaw. It's nothing to worry about."

"Blink twice if you can hear me."

Blink, blink.

"Good."

He locks his eyes on the nurse, whose eyes still smile. They always smile. Someone made her have eternally smiling eyes.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stop blinking now."

* * *

"Where's the clock?" says one of the surgeons.

"Two hours, thirty-three minutes."

"We're running late."

Not quite darkness, just an absence of light. He hears everything around him but can no longer communicate. Another team has entered.

"I'm still here," the nurse tells him, but then she falls silent. A few moments later he hears footsteps, and he knows she's left.

"You'll feel a tingling in your scalp," says a surgeon. "It's nothing to worry about." It's the last time they talk to him. After that, the doctors talk like Roland is no longer there.

"Did you see yesterday's game?"

"Heartbreaker."

"Splitting the corpus callosum."

"Nice technique."

"Well, it's not brain surgery." Laughter all around.

Memories tweak and spark. Faces. Dreamlike pulses of light deep in his mind. Feelings. Things he hasn't thought about in years. The memories bloom, then they're gone. When Roland was ten, he broke his arm. The doctor told his mom he could have a new arm, or a cast. The cast was cheaper. He drew a shark on it. When the cast came off he got a tattoo to make the shark permanent.

"If they had just made that three-pointer."

"It'll be the Bulls again. Or the Lakers."

"Starting on the left cerebral cortex."

Another memory tweaks.

When I was six, my father went to jail for something he did before I got born. I never knew what he did, but Mom says I'm just the same.

"The Suns don't stand a chance."

"Well, if they had a decent coaching staff . . ."

"Left temporal lobe."

When I was three, I had a babysitter. She was beautiful. She shook my sister. Real hard. My sister got wrong. Never got right again. Beautiful is dangerous. Better get them first.

"Well, maybe they'll make the playoffs next year."

"Or the year after that."

"Did we get the auditory nerves?"

"Not yet. Getting them right n—"

I'm alone. And I'm crying. And no one's coming to the crib. And the nightlight burned out. And I'm mad. I'm so mad.

Left frontal lobe.

I . . . I . . . I don't feel so good.

Left occipital lobe.

I . . . I . . . I don't remember where . . .
Left parietal lobe.
I . . . I . . . I can't remember my name, but . . . but . . .
Right temporal.
. . . but I'm still here.
Right frontal.
I'm still here . . .
Right occipital.
I'm still . . .
Right parietal.
I'm . . .
Cerebellum.
I'm . . .
Thalamus.
I . . .
Hypothalamus.
I . . .
Hippocampus.
. . .
Medulla.
. . .
. . .
. . .

* * *

"Where's the clock?"
"Three hours, nineteen minutes."
"All right, I'm on break. Prep for the next one."

OceanofPDF.com

62 · Lev

The detonators are hidden in a sock in the back of his cubby. Anyone who finds them will think they're Band-Aids. He tries not to think about it. It's Blaine's job to think about it, and to tell him when it's time.

Today Lev's unit of tithes are taking a nature walk to commune with creation. The pastor who leads them is one of the more self-important ones. He speaks as if every word out of his mouth were a pearl of wisdom, pausing after each thought as if he expects someone to write it down.

He leads them to an odd winter-bare tree. Lev, who is used to winters with ice and snow, finds it odd that trees in Arizona still lose their leaves. This tree has a multitude of branches that don't quite match, each with different bark and a different texture.

"I wanted you to see this," the pastor says to the crew. "It's not much to see now, but, oh, you should see it in the spring. Over the years many of us have grafted branches from our favorite trees to the trunk." He points to the various limbs. "This branch sprouts pink cherry blossoms, and this one fills with huge sycamore leaves. This one fills with purple jacaranda flowers, and this one grows heavy with peaches."

The tithes examine it, touching its branches cautiously, as if it might at any moment turn into the burning bush. "What kind of tree was it to begin with?" asks one of the tithes.

The pastor can't answer him. "I'm not sure, but it really doesn't matter—what matters is what it's become. We call it our little 'tree of life.' Isn't it wonderful?"

"There's nothing wonderful about it." The words are out of Lev's mouth before he realizes he's spoken them, like a sudden, unexpected belch. All eyes turn toward him. He quickly covers. "It's the work of

man, and we shouldn't be prideful," he says. "'When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with humility comes wisdom.'"

"Yes," says the pastor. "Proverbs—eleven, isn't it?"

"Proverbs 11:2."

"Very good." He appears suitably humbled. "Well, it *is* pretty in the spring."

Their path back to the tithing house takes them by fields and courts where the terribles are being observed and brought to the best possible physical condition before their unwinding. The tithes endure the occasional jeers and hisses from the terribles, like martyrs.

It's as they pass one of the dormitories that Lev finds himself face-to-face with someone he never expected to see again. He finds himself standing in front of Connor.

Each was heading in a different direction. Each sees the other at the same instant and stops short, staring in absolute shock.

"Lev?"

Suddenly the pompous pastor is there, grabbing Lev by both shoulders. "Get away from him!" the pastor snarls at Connor. "Haven't you done enough damage already?" Then he spirits Lev away, leaving Connor standing there.

"It's all right," says the pastor, his protective grip on Lev's shoulders still firm as they stride away. "We're all aware of who he is and what he did to you. We were hoping you wouldn't find out he was at the same harvest camp. But I promise you, Lev, he will never harm you again." And then he says quietly, "He's being unwound this afternoon."

"What?"

"And good riddance, too!"

* * *

It's not unusual to see tithes unsupervised on the grounds of Happy Jack, although they're usually in clusters—or at the very least, groups of two. It's rare to see one hurrying alone, almost running across the fields.

Lev hadn't lingered long once he got back to the tithing house—he took the first opportunity to slip out. Now he searches everywhere for

Blaine and Mai.

Connor is being unwound this afternoon. How could this have happened? How did he get here? Connor was safe at the Graveyard. Did the Admiral throw him out, or did he leave on his own? Either way, Connor must have been caught and brought here. The one thing Lev had taken comfort in—the safety of his friends—has now been torn away. Connor's unwinding must not be allowed . . . and it's in Lev's power to stop it.

He finds Blaine in the grassy commons between the dining hall and the dormitories, being put through a regimen of calisthenics with his unit. Blaine does them oddly, putting as little force into them as possible, making all his moves low-impact.

"I need to talk to you."

Blaine looks at him, surprised and furious. "What, are you crazy? What are you doing here?"

A staffer sees him and makes a beeline toward them—after all, everyone knows tithes and terribles do not mix.

"It's all right," Lev tells the staffer, "I know him from home. I just wanted to say good-bye."

The staffer reluctantly nods his approval. "All right, but make it quick."

Lev pulls Blaine aside, making sure they're far enough away that nobody can hear. "We're doing it today," Lev tells him. "No more waiting."

"Hey," says Blaine, "*I* decide when we do it, and I say not yet."

"The longer we wait, the longer we risk going off by accident."

"So? Randomness works too."

He wants to hit Blaine but knows if he does they'll probably leave a crater in the field fifty yards wide, so he tells Blaine the only thing he knows for sure will get him to give in.

"They know about us," whispers Lev.

"What?"

"They don't know who it is, but they know there are clappers here—I'm sure they're reviewing the blood tests right now, looking for anything unusual. It won't be long until they find us."

Blaine grits his teeth and curses. He thinks for a moment, then starts shaking his head. “No. No, I’m not ready.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re ready. You want chaos? Well, it’s coming today, whether you want it or not—because if they find us, what do you think they’ll do?”

Blaine looks even sicker at the prospect. “They’ll detonate us in the forest?”

“Or out in the desert where no one will ever know.”

Blaine considers it for a moment more, then takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I’ll find Mai at lunch and tell her. We’ll go at two o’clock sharp.”

“Make it one.”

* * *

Lev rummages through his cubby, getting more and more frantic. Those socks have to be here! They have to be—but he can’t find them. The detonators aren’t crucial, but they’re cleaner. Lev wants it to be clean. Clean and quick.

“That’s mine.”

Lev turns to see the towheaded kid with the emerald-green eyes standing behind him. “That’s my cubby. Yours is over there.”

Lev looks around and realizes he’s off by one bed. There’s nothing in the unit to identify one bed, or one cubby, from another.

“If you need socks, I can lend you.”

“No, I’ve got enough of my own, thanks.” He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes to get his panic under control, and goes to the right cubby. The sock with the detonators is there. He slips it in his pocket.

“You okay, Lev? You look kinda funny.”

“I’m fine. I’ve just been running, that’s all. Running on the treadmill.”

“No, you haven’t,” says the kid. “I was just in the gym.”

“Listen, mind your own business, okay? I’m not your buddy, I’m not your friend.”

“But we oughta be friends.”

"No. You don't know me. I'm not like you, okay, so just leave me alone!"

Then he hears a deeper voice behind him. "That's enough, Lev."

He turns to see a man in a suit. It's not one of the pastors but the counselor who admitted him a week ago. This can't be good.

The counselor nods to the towheaded kid. "Thank you, Sterling." The boy casts his eyes down and hurries out. "We assigned Sterling to keep an eye on you and make sure you're adjusting. We are, to say the least, concerned."

* * *

Lev sits in a room with the counselor, and two pastors. The sock bulges in his pocket. He bounces his knees nervously, then remembers he's not supposed to make any jarring motions, or he might detonate. He forces himself to stop.

"You seem troubled, Lev," says the counselor. "We'd like to understand why."

Lev looks at the clock. It's 12:48. Twelve minutes until he, Mai, and Blaine are supposed to meet and take care of business.

"I'm being tithed," Lev says. "Isn't that enough of a reason?"

The younger of the two pastors leans forward. "We try to make sure every tithe enters the divided state in the proper frame of mind."

"We wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't try to make things right for you," says the elder pastor, then offers a smile so forced, it's more like a grimace.

Lev wants to scream at them, but he knows that won't get him out of here any faster. "I just don't like being around other kids right now. I'd rather prepare for this alone, okay?"

"But it's not okay," says the older pastor. "That's not the way we do things here. Everyone supports one another."

The junior pastor leans forward. "You need to give the other boys a chance. They're all good kids."

"Well maybe I'm not!" Lev can't help but look at the clock again. Twelve fifty. Mai and Blaine will be in place in ten minutes, and what if he's still here in this stinking office? Won't that be just great.

“Have somewhere you need to be?” the counselor asks. “You keep checking the time.”

Lev knows his answer needs to make sense or they truly will become suspicious of him. “I . . . I heard the kid who kidnapped me was being unwound today. I was just wondering if it had happened yet.”

The pastors look at one another and at the counselor, who leans back in his chair, as calm as can be. “If he hasn’t been, he will be shortly. Lev, I think it would be healthy for you to discuss what happened to you while you were held hostage. I’m sure it was horrible, but talking about it can take away the power of the memory. I’d like to hold a special group tonight with your unit. It will be a time for you to share with the others what you’ve been holding inside. I think you’ll find they’ll be very understanding.”

“Tonight,” says Lev. “Okay. Fine. I’ll talk about everything tonight. Maybe you’re right and it will make me feel better.”

“We just want to ease your mind,” says one of the pastors.

“So, can I go now?”

The counselor studies him for a moment more. “You seem so tense. I’d like to talk you through some guided relaxation exercises. . . .”

OceanofPDF.com

63 · Guard

He hates his job, he hates the heat, he hates that he has to stand in front of the Chop Shop for hours guarding the doors, making sure no one unauthorized enters or leaves. He had dreams back in StaHo of starting a business with his buddies, but no one loans start-up money to StaHo kids. Even after he changed his last name from Ward to Mullard—the name of the richest family in town—he couldn't fool anyone. Turns out half the kids from his state home took on that name when they left, figuring they could outsmart the world. In the end, he outsmarted no one but himself. The best he could do was find a series of unfulfilling jobs in the year he's been out of StaHo—the most recent of which is being a harvest camp guard.

On the roof, the band has started its afternoon set. At least that helps the time to pass a little more quickly.

Two Unwinds approach, and climb the steps toward him. They're not being escorted by guards and both carry plates covered with aluminum foil. The guard doesn't like the look of them. The boy's a flesh-head. The girl is Asian.

"What do you want? You're not supposed to be here."

"We were told to give this to the band." They both look nervous and shifty. This is nothing new. All Unwinds get nervous near the Chop Shop—and to the guard, all Unwinds look shifty.

The guard peeks under the aluminum foil. Roast chicken. Mashed potatoes. They do send food up to the band once in a while, but usually it's staff that carries the food, not Unwinds. "I thought they just had lunch."

"Guess not," says the flesh-head. He looks like he'd rather be anywhere in the world but standing in front of the Chop Shop, so the guard decides to draw it out, making them stand there even longer.

"I'll have to call this in," he says. He pulls out his phone and calls the front office. He gets a busy signal. Typical. The guard wonders

which he'd get in more trouble for—letting them bring the food in, or turning them away if they really were sent by administration. He considers the plate in the girl's hands. "Let me see that." He peels back the foil and takes the largest chicken breast. "Go in through the glass doors, and the stairs are to your left. If I see you go anywhere but up the stairs, I'll come in there and tranq you so fast, you won't know what hit you."

Once they're inside, they're out of sight, out of mind. He doesn't know that although they went into the stairwell, they never brought the food to the band—they just ditched the plates. And he never noticed the little round Band-Aids on their palms.

OceanofPDF.com

64 · Connor

Connor looks out of the dormitory window, devastated. Lev is here at Happy Jack. How he got here doesn't matter; all that matters is that Lev will now be unwound. It's all been for nothing. Connor's sense of futility makes him feel like a part of himself has already been cut out and taken to market.

"Connor Lassiter?"

He turns to see two guards at the entrance. Around him, most of the kids have left the unit for their afternoon activity. The ones that remain take a quick glance at the guards, and at Connor, then look away, busying themselves in anything that will keep them out of this business.

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"Your presence is requested at the harvest clinic," says the first guard. The other guard doesn't talk. He just chomps on chewing gum.

Connor's first reaction is that this can't be what it sounds like. Maybe Risa sent them. Maybe she wants to play something for him. After all, now that she's in the band, she has more influence than the average Unwind, doesn't she?

"The harvest clinic," echoes Connor. "What for?"

"Well, let's just say you're leaving Happy Jack today."

Chomp, chomp, goes the other guard.

"Leaving?"

"C'mon, son, do we have to spell it out for you? You're a problem here. Too many of the other kids look up to you, and that's never a good thing at a harvest camp. So the administration decided to take care of the problem."

They advance on Connor, lifting him up by the arms.

"No! No! You can't do this."

"We can, and we are. It's our job—and whether you make it hard, or easy, it doesn't matter. Our job gets done either way."

Connor looks to the other kids as if they might help him, but they don't. "Good-bye, Connor," says one, but he won't even look in Connor's direction.

The gum-chewing guard looks more sympathetic, which means there might be a way to get through to him. Connor looks at him pleadingly. It makes him stop chewing for an instant. The guard thinks for a moment and says, "I got a buddy looking for brown eyes, on account of his girlfriend don't like the ones he got. He's a decent guy—you could do a lot worse."

"What!"

"We sometimes get dibs on parts and stuff," he says. "One of the perks of the job. Anyways, all I'm saying is I can give you some peace of mind. You'll know your eyes won't go to some lowlife or nothin'."

The other guard snickers. "Piece of mind. Good one. Okay, time to go." They pull Connor forward, and he tries to prepare himself, but how do you prepare yourself for something like this? *Maybe what they say is right. Maybe it's not dying. Maybe it's just passing into a new form of living. It could be all right, couldn't it? Couldn't it?*

He tries to imagine what it must be like for an inmate to be led to his execution. Do they fight it? Connor tries to imagine himself kicking and screaming his way to the Chop Shop, but what would be the use of that? If his time on Earth as Connor Lassiter is ending, then maybe he should use the time well. He should allow himself to spend his final moments appreciating who he was. No! Who he still *is*! He should appreciate the last breaths moving in and out of his lungs while those lungs are still under his control. He should feel the tension and release in *his* muscles as he moves, and see the many sights of Happy Jack with *his* eyes and store them in *his* brain.

"Hands off me, I'll walk by myself," he orders the guards, and they instantly release him, perhaps surprised by the authority in his voice. He rolls his shoulders, cracks his neck, and strides forward. The first step is the hardest, but from that moment on he decides that he will neither run nor dawdle. He will neither quiver nor fight. He will take this last walk of his life in steady strides—and in a few weeks from now, someone, somewhere, will hold in their mind the memory that

this young man, whoever he was, faced his unwinding with dignity and pride.

OceanofPDF.com

65 · Clappers

Who can say what goes through the mind of a clapper in the moments before carrying out that evil deed? No doubt whatever those thoughts are, they are lies. However, like all dangerous deceptions, the lies that clappers tell themselves wear seductive disguises.

For clappers who have been led to believe their acts are smiled upon by God, their lie is clothed in holy robes and has outstretched arms promising a reward that will never come.

For clappers who believe their act will somehow bring about change in the world, their lie is disguised as a crowd looking back at them from the future, smiling in appreciation for what they've done.

For clappers who seek only to share their personal misery with the world, their lie is an image of themselves freed from their pain by witnessing the pain of others.

And for clappers who are driven by vengeance, their lie is a scale of justice, weighted evenly on both sides, finally in balance.

It is only when a clapper brings his hands together that the lie reveals itself, abandoning the clapper in that final instant so that he exits this world utterly alone, without so much as a lie to accompany him into oblivion.

Or her.

The path that brought Mai to this place in her life was full of fury and disappointment. Her breaking point was Vincent. He was a boy no one knew. He was a boy she met and fell in love with in the warehouse more than a month ago. He was a boy who died in midair, crammed into a crate with four other kids who choked on their own carbon dioxide. No one seemed to notice his disappearance, and certainly no one cared. No one but Mai, who had found her soul mate, and had lost him that day she arrived in the Graveyard.

The world was to blame, but when she secretly witnessed the Admiral's golden five burying Vincent and the others, she was able to

give faces to her fury. The Goldens buried Vincent not with respect, but with profanities. They cracked jokes and laughed. They covered the five dead boys carelessly with dirt like cats cover their turds. Mai had never felt such rage.

Once Cleaver befriended her, she told him what she had seen, and he agreed that revenge was in order. It was Cleaver's idea to kill the Goldens. It was Blaine who drugged them and brought them to the FedEx jet—but it was Mai who sealed the hatch of the crate. It was amazing to her that killing could be as easy as closing a door.

After that, there was no turning back for Mai. Her bed had been made; all that remained was for her to lie in it. She knows that today will be the day she climbs in and goes to her rest.

Once inside the Chop Shop she finds a storage room full of surgical gloves, syringes, and shiny instruments she cannot identify. She knows Blaine is somewhere in the north wing of the building. She expects Lev is in position too, standing on the loading dock at the back of the Chop Shop—at least that's the plan. It is now one o'clock on the nose. Time to do this.

Mai enters the storage room and closes the door. And waits. She will do this, but not quite yet. Let one of the others go. She refuses to be the first.

* * *

Blaine waits in a deserted hallway on the second floor. This area of the Chop Shop doesn't appear to be in use. He has decided not to use his detonators. Detonators are for wimps. For a hardcore clapper, a single, powerful clap is enough to bring it on, even without detonators—and Blaine wants to believe he's hardcore, like his brother was. He stands at the end of the hallway, legs spread to shoulder width, bouncing on the balls of his feet like a tennis player awaiting a serve. His hands are held apart. But he waits. He's hardcore, yes—but he's not going first.

* * *

Lev has convinced the psychologist that he's suitably relaxed. It's the best acting performance of his life, because his heart is racing and

there's so much adrenaline flooding his blood, he's afraid he'll spontaneously combust.

"Why don't you go back to the tithing house?" the doctor suggests. "Spend some time getting to know the other kids. Make an effort, Lev—you'll be glad you did."

"Yes. Yes, I'll do that. Thank you. I feel better now."

"Good."

The counselor motions to the pastors and everyone rises. It is 1:04. Lev wants to race out the door, but he knows that will just get him another therapy session. He leaves the office with the pastors, who babble about his place in the scheme of things and the joys of tithing. It's only as Lev gets outside that he becomes aware of the commotion. Kids are all running from their activities and into the commons between the dormitories and the Chop Shop. Have Blaine and Mai gone off already? He didn't hear any explosions. No, this is something else.

"It's the Akron AWOL," he hears one of the kids shout. "He's being unwound!"

That's when Lev spots Connor. He's halfway down the red carpet, marching with two guards right behind him. Kids have gathered in the grassy commons, but they keep their distance as more kids arrive. They're spilling out of the dormitories, the dining hall—everywhere.

The band has stopped playing in the middle of a tune. The keyboardist—a girl—wails at the sight of Connor on the red stone path. Connor looks up at her, halts for a second, and blows her a kiss before continuing on. Lev can hear her crying.

Now guards, staffers, and counselors converge on the quad in panic, trying to herd this volatile gathering of kids back to their places, but no one will leave. The kids just stand there—maybe they can't stop this, but they can witness it. They can be there as Connor strides out of this life.

"Let's hear it for the Akron AWOL!" one boy shouts. "Let's hear it for Connor!" and he starts to applaud. Soon the entire crowd of kids is applauding and cheering Connor as he marches down the red carpet.

Applause.

Clapping.

Mai and Blaine!

Suddenly Lev realizes what's about to happen. He can't let Connor go in there! Not now! He's got to stop him.

Lev breaks away from the pastors. Connor is almost to the steps of the Chop Shop. Lev races between the kids, but he can't push his way through them. If he does, he knows he'll detonate. He must be quick, but he must be careful—and being careful slows him down.

"Connor!" He screams, but the cheers all around him are too loud. And now the band has begun to play again. They're playing the national anthem, just like they do at the funerals of great Americans. The guards and the staff can't stop this. They try but they can't—and they're so busy trying to control the crowd, they let Lev slip right past onto the red carpet.

Now he has a clear path to Connor, who has begun climbing the steps. Lev screams his name again, but Connor still can't hear. Although Lev races down the path, he's still twenty yards away when the glass doors open and Connor steps inside with the guards.

"No! Connor! No!"

But the doors close. Connor is inside the Chop Shop. But he won't be unwound. He's going to die just like everyone else inside . . . and as if to complete Lev's failure, he finally takes a look up at the roof to catch the gaze of the keyboard player looking down at him.

It's Risa.

How could he have been so stupid? He should have known it was her from the way she wailed, and from the kiss that Connor blew her. Lev stands there, petrified with disbelief . . . And then the world comes to an end.

* * *

Blaine still stands at the end of the hall, waiting for someone else to go first.

"Hey! Who are you? What are you doing here?" a guard shouts at Blaine.

"Stay back!" Blaine says. "Stay back, or else!"

The guard pulls out his tranq pistol and speaks into his radio. “I got an Unwind loose up hear. I need backup!”

“I’m warning you,” says Blaine. But the guard knows exactly how to deal with an Unwind loose in the Chop Shop. He aims his tranq gun at Blaine’s left thigh, and fires.

“No!”

But it’s too late. The impact of a tranq bullet is more effective than any detonator. Blaine and the guard are instantly incinerated as the six quarts of liquid explosive coursing through Blaine’s body ignites.

* * *

Mai hears the explosion. It shakes the entire storage room like an earthquake. She doesn’t think about it. She can’t. Not anymore. She looks at the detonators on her palm. This is for Vincent. This is for her parents, who signed the Unwind order. This is for the whole world.

She claps once.

Nothing.

She claps twice.

Nothing.

She claps a third time.

The third time is the charm.

* * *

The moment Risa sees Lev standing below, on the red carpet, an explosion rips through the north wing of the Chop Shop. She turns to see the entire wing crumble. “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!”

“We gotta get out of here!” yells Dalton, but before he can make a move, a second explosion roars beneath them, sending the air-vent caps shooting skyward like rockets. The roof beneath their feet cracks like thin ice, and the entire roof gives way. Risa plunges with the rest of the band into the smoky abyss, and in that instant all she can think of is Connor, and how the band never got to finish playing his farewell anthem.

* * *

Lev stands there as the glass blows past him. He sees the band fall as the roof collapses. A howl builds up inside him, escaping his mouth, an inhuman sound born of an agony he can't describe. His world has truly ended. Now he must finish the job.

Standing there before the ruined building, he pulls out the sock in his pocket. He fumbles with it until he finds the detonators. He peels the backs, revealing the adhesive, and sticks them to his palms. They look like stigmata, the nail wounds in the hands of Christ. Still wailing his agony, he holds his hands up before him, preparing to make the pain go away. He holds his hands up before him. He holds his hands up before him. He holds his hands up before him.

And he cannot bring them together.

He wants to. He needs to. But he can't.

Make this go away. Please, somebody make this all go away.

No matter how hard he tries, no matter how much his mind wants to end this here and now, another part of him—a *stronger* part of him—refuses to let him clap his hands together. Now he is even a failure as a failure.

God, dear God, what am I doing? What have I done? How did I get here?

The crowd, which had run at the sound of the blasts, has come back. They ignore Lev, because there's something else they see.

"Look!" someone shouts. *"Look!"*

Lev turns to see where the kid is pointing. Coming out of the ruined glass doors of the Chop Shop is Connor. He's stumbling. His face is a shredded, bloody mess. He's lost an eye. His right arm is crushed and mangled. But he's alive!

"Connor blew up the Chop Shop!" someone yells. "He blew it up and saved us all!"

And then a guard bursts onto the scene. "Get back to your dormitories. All of you! Now!"

No one moves.

"Didn't you hear me?"

Then a kid slams the guard with a right hook that practically spins his whole body around. The guard responds by pulling out his tranq

gun and shooting the kid in the offending arm. The kid goes to dreamland, but there are other kids, and they tear the gun out of the guard's hand, using it against him. Just like Connor once had.

The word that the Akron AWOL blew up the Chop Shop zigs like lightning through every Unwind in Happy Jack, and in seconds, disobedience erupts into a full-scale revolt. Every terrible is now a terror. The guards fire, but there are simply too many kids, and not enough tranq bullets. For every kid that goes down, there's another kid that doesn't. The guards are quickly overwhelmed, and once they are, the mob starts storming the front gate.

* * *

Connor has no understanding of this event. All he knows is that he was led into the building, then something happened. And now he's not in the building anymore. His face is wrong. It hurts. It hurts bad. He can't move his arm. The ground feels strange beneath his feet. His lungs hurt. He coughs and they hurt more.

He's stumbling down steps now. There are kids here. Lots of kids. Unwinds. That's right, he's an Unwind. They're all Unwinds. But the meaning of that is slipping from him fast. The kids are running. They're fighting. Then Connor's legs give out, and suddenly he's on the ground. Looking up at the sun.

He wants to sleep. He knows this isn't a good place, but he wants to anyway. He feels wet. He feels sticky. Is his nose running?

Then there's an angel hovering above him, all in white.

"Don't move," the angel says. Connor recognizes the voice.

"Hi, Lev. How are things . . . ?"

"Shh."

"My arm hurts," Connor says lazily. "Did you bite me again?"

Then Lev does something funny. He takes off his shirt. Then he tears his shirt in half. He presses half the torn shirt to Connor's face. That makes his face hurt more. He groans. Then Lev takes the other half of his shirt and ties it around Connor's arm. He ties it tight. That hurts too.

"Hey . . . what . . ."

“Don’t try to talk. Just relax.”

There are others around him now. He doesn’t know who. A kid holding a tranq pistol looks at Lev, and Lev nods. Then the kid kneels down next to Connor.

“This is going to hurt a little,” says the kid with the tranq gun. “But I think you need it.”

He aims uncertainly at various parts of Connor’s body, then settles on Connor’s hip. Connor hears the gunshot, feels a sharp pain in his hip, and as his vision begins to darken he sees Lev hurrying shirtless toward a building that’s pouring out black smoke.

“Weird,” says Connor. Then his mind goes to a quiet place where none of this matters.

OceanofPDF.com

Part 7

Consciousness

"A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us . . . Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

—*Albert Einstein*

"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

—*Albert Einstein*

OceanofPDF.com

66 · Connor

Connor regains consciousness with nothing but hazy confusion where his thoughts ought to be. His face aches, and he can see out of only one eye. He feels pressure over his other eye.

He's in a white room. There's a window through which he can see daylight. This is unquestionably a hospital room, and that pressure over his eye must be a bandage. He tries to lift his right arm but there's an ache in his shoulder, so he decides it's not worth the effort just yet.

Only now does he begin to piece together the events that landed him here. He was about to be unwound. There was an explosion. There was a revolt. Then Lev was standing over him. That's all he can remember.

A nurse comes into the room. "So you're finally awake! How are you feeling?"

"Good," he says, his voice little more than a croak. He clears his throat. "How long?"

"You've been in a medically induced coma for a little over two weeks," says the nurse.

Two weeks? With a life that has been lived day to day for so long, two weeks sounds like an eternity. And Risa . . . what about Risa? "There was a girl," he says. "She was on the roof of the Chop—of the harvest clinic. Does anyone know what happened to her?"

The nurse's expression doesn't give anything away. "That can all be sorted out later."

"But—"

"No buts. Right now you need time to heal—and I have to say, you're doing better than anyone expected, Mr. Mullard."

His first thought is that he hasn't heard her right. He shifts uncomfortably. "Excuse me?"

She fluffs his pillows. “Just relax now, Mr. Mullard. Let us handle everything.”

His second thought is that he’s been unwound after all. He’s been unwound, and somehow, someone got his entire brain. He’s inside someone else now. But as he thinks about it, he knows that can’t be it. His voice still sounds like his voice. When he rubs his tongue against his teeth, those teeth are still the ones he remembers.

“My name is Connor,” he tells her. “Connor Lassiter.”

The nurse studies him with an expression that’s kind, but calculated—almost disturbingly so. “Well,” she says, “as it so happens, an ID with the picture charred off was found in the wreckage. It belonged to a nineteen-year-old guard by the name of Elvis Mullard. With all the confusion after the blast there really was no telling who was who, and many of us agreed that it would be a shame to let that ID go to waste, don’t you agree?” She reaches over and adjusts the angle of Connor’s bed until he’s sitting up more comfortably. “Now tell me,” she asks, “What was your name again?”

Connor gets it. He closes his eye, takes a deep breath, and opens it again. “Do I have a middle name?”

The nurse checks the chart. “Robert.”

“Then my name is E. Robert Mullard.”

The nurse smiles and holds out her hand to shake his. “A pleasure to meet you, Robert.”

As a reflex, Connor reaches out his right hand toward hers, and gets that dull ache in his shoulder again.

“Sorry,” says the nurse. “My fault.” She shakes his left hand instead. “Your shoulder will feel a bit sore until the graft is completely healed.”

“What did you just say?”

The nurse sighs. “Me and my big mouth. The doctors always want to be the ones to tell you, but the cat’s out of the bag now, isn’t it? Well, the bad news is that we weren’t able to save your arm, or your right eye. The good news is that, as E. Robert Mullard, you qualified for emergency transplants. I’ve seen the eye—don’t worry, it’s a decent match. As for the arm, well, the new one is a little more muscular

than your left one, but some good physical therapy can even that out in no time."

Connor lets it sink in, playing it over in his mind. *Eye. Arm. Physical therapy.*

"I know it's a lot to get used to," says the nurse.

For the first time Connor looks at his new hand. There are bandages padding his shoulder, and his arm is in a sling. He flexes the fingers. They flex. He twists his wrist. It twists. The fingernails need clipping, and the knuckles are thicker than his own. He runs his thumb across the pads of his fingertips. The sense of touch is just as it ever was. Then he rotates his wrist a bit farther, and stops. He feels a wave of panic surge through him, one that resolves into a knot deep in his gut.

The nurse grins as she looks at the arm. "Parts often come with their own personalities," she says. "Nothing to worry about. You must be hungry. I'll get you some lunch."

"Yeah," says Connor. "Lunch. That's good."

She leaves him alone with the arm. His arm. An arm that bears the unmistakable tattoo of a tiger shark.

OceanofPDF.com

67 · Risa

Risa's life as she knew it ended the day the clappers blew up the Chop Shop—and everyone eventually did learn that it was clappers, not Connor. The evidence was indisputable. Especially after the confession of the clapper who survived.

Unlike Connor, Risa never lost consciousness. Even though she was pinned beneath a steel I beam, she stayed wide awake. As she lay there in the wreckage, some of the pain she felt when the I beam came down on her was gone. She didn't know whether that was a good sign, or bad. Dalton was in lots of pain though. He was terrified. Risa calmed him down. She talked to him, telling him it was all right—that everything would be fine. She kept telling him that right up until the moment he died. The guitar player had been luckier. He was able to wrestle himself out from under the debris, but he couldn't free Risa, so he left, promising her he'd send back help. He must have kept his promise, because help finally did come. It took three people to lift the beam, but only one to carry her out.

Now she rests in a hospital room, trussed up in a contraption that looks more like a torture device than a bed. She is riddled with steel pins like a human voodoo doll. The pins are held in precise place by rigid scaffolding. She can see her toes, but she can't feel them. From now on, seeing them will have to be enough.

"You have a visitor."

A nurse stands at the door, and when she steps aside, Connor is standing in the doorway. He's bruised and bandaged, but very much alive. Her eyes instantly fill with tears, but she knows she can't let herself sob. It still hurts too much to sob. "I knew they were lying," she says. "They said you died in the explosion—that you were trapped in the building—but I saw you outside. I knew they were lying."

"I probably would have died," Connor said, "but Lev stopped the bleeding. He saved me."

"He saved me, too," Risa tells him. "He carried me out of the building."

Connor smiles. "Not bad for a lousy little tithe."

By the look on his face, Risa can tell he doesn't know that Lev was one of the clappers—the one who didn't go off. She decides not to tell him. It's still all over the news; he'll know soon enough.

Connor tells her of his coma, and about his new identity. Risa tells him how few of Happy Jack's AWOLs have been caught—how the kids stormed the gates and escaped. She glances at his sling as they speak. The fingers sticking out of that arm sling are definitely not Connor's. She knows what must have happened, and she can tell he's self-conscious about it.

"So, what do they say?" Connor asks. "About your injuries, I mean. You're going to be okay, right?"

Risa considers how she might tell him, then just decides to be quick about it. "They tell me I'm paralyzed from the waist down."

Connor waits for more, but that's all she has to give him. "Well . . . that's not so bad, right? They can fix that—they're always fixing that."

"Yes," says Risa. "They fix it by replacing a severed spine with the spine of an Unwind. That's why I refused the operation."

He looks at her in disbelief, and she in turn points at his arm. "You would have done the same thing if they'd given you a choice. Well, I had a choice, and I made it."

"I'm so sorry, Risa."

"Don't be!" The one thing she doesn't want from Connor is pity. "They can't unwind me now—there are laws against unwinding the disabled—but if I got the operation, they'd unwind me the moment I was healed. This way I get to stay whole." She smiles at him triumphantly. "So you're not the only one who beat the system!"

He smiles at her and rolls his bandaged shoulder. The sling shifts, exposing more of his new arm—enough to reveal the tattoo. He tries to hide it, but it's too late. She sees it. She *knows* it. And when she meets Connor's eye, he looks away in shame.

"Connor . . . ?"

“I promise,” he says. “I promise I will never touch you with this hand.”

Risa knows this is a crucial moment for both of them. That arm—the same one that held her back against a bathroom wall. How could she look at it now with anything but disgust? Those fingers that threatened unspeakable things. How can they make her feel anything but revulsion? But when she looks at Connor, all that fades away. There’s only him.

“Let me see it,” she says.

Connor hesitates, so she reaches out and gently slips it from the sling. “Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

She brushes her fingers across the back of his hand. “Can you feel that?”

Connor nods.

Then she gently lifts the hand to her face, pressing the palm to her cheek. She holds it there for a moment, then lets go, letting Connor take over. He moves his hand across her cheek, wiping away a tear with his finger. He softly strokes her neck, and she closes her eyes. She feels as he moves his fingertips across her lips before he takes his hand away. Risa opens her eyes and takes the hand in hers, clasping it tightly.

“I *know* this is your hand now,” she tells him. “Roland would never have touched me like that.” Connor smiles, and Risa takes a moment to look down at the shark on his wrist. It holds no fear for her now, because the shark has been tamed by the soul of a boy. No—the soul of a man.

OceanofPDF.com

68 · Lev

Not far away, in a high-security federal detention center, Levi Jedediah Calder is held in a cell designed for his very specific needs. The cell is padded. There is a steel blast door three inches thick. The room is kept at a constant forty-five degrees Fahrenheit to keep Lev's body temperature from rising too high. Lev is not cold, though—in fact he's hot. He's hot because he's wrapped in layer after layer of fire-resistant insulation. He looks like a mummy, suspended in midair—but unlike a mummy, his hands aren't crossed over his chest, they're held out to each side and lashed to a crossbeam so he cannot bring his hands together. The way Lev sees it, they didn't know whether to crucify him or mummify him, so they did both. This way, he can't clap, he can't fall, he can't inadvertently detonate himself—and if for some reason he does, the cell is designed to withstand the blast.

They've given him four transfusions. They won't tell him how many more he'll need until the explosive is out of his system. They won't tell him anything. The federal agents who come visit him are only interested in what he can tell them. They've given him a lawyer who talks about insanity like it's a good thing. Lev keeps telling him that he isn't insane, although he's not even sure himself anymore.

The door to his cell opens. He expects another interrogation, but his visitor is someone new. It takes a moment for Lev to recognize him—mainly because he's not wearing his modest pastor's vestments. He wears jeans and a striped buttondown shirt.

"Good morning, Lev."

"Pastor Dan?"

The door slams closed behind him, but it doesn't echo. The soft walls absorb the sound. Pastor Dan rubs his arms against the cold. They should have told him to bring a jacket.

"Are they treating you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," says Lev. "The good thing about being explosive is that no one can beat you."

Pastor Dan gives an obligatory chuckle, then awkwardness takes over. He forces himself to meet Lev's eyes. "I understand they'll only keep you wrapped up like this for a few weeks, until you're out of the woods."

Lev wonders which particular woods he means. Certainly his life will now be one dark forest within another, within another. Lev doesn't even know why the pastor is here, or what he hopes to prove. Should Lev be happy to see him, or should he be mad? This is the man who always told him that tithing was a holy thing from the time he was a small boy—and then told him to run from it. Is Pastor Dan here to reprimand him? To congratulate him? Did Lev's parents send him because he's so untouchable now, they won't come themselves? Or maybe Lev's about to be executed and he's here to give last rites.

"Why don't you just get it over with?" Lev says.

"Get what over with?"

"Whatever you're here to do. Do it, and go."

There are no chairs in the room, so Pastor Dan leans back against the padded wall. "How much have they told you about what's going on out there?"

"All I know is what goes on in here. Which isn't much."

Pastor Dan sighs, rubs his eyes, and takes his time to consider where to begin. "First of all, do you know a boy by the name of Cyrus Finch?"

The mention of his name makes Lev begin to panic. Lev knew his background would be checked and rechecked. That's what happens to clappers—their whole life becomes pages pasted on a wall to be examined, and the people in their lives become suspects. Of course, that usually happens after the clapper has applauded his way into the next world.

"CyFi had nothing to do with this!" says Lev. "Nothing at all. They can't pull him into this!"

"Calm down. He's fine. It just so happens that he's come forward and is making a big stink—and since he knew you, people are

listening."

"A stink about me?"

"About unwinding," says Pastor Dan, for the first time moving closer to Lev. "What happened at Happy Jack Harvest Camp—it got a whole lot of people talking, people who had just been burying their heads in the sand. There have been protests in Washington against unwinding—Cyrus even testified before Congress."

Lev tries to imagine CyFi in front of a congressional committee, trash-talking them in prewar sitcom Umber. The thought of it makes Lev smile. It's the first time he's smiled in a long time.

"There's talk that they might even lower the legal age of adulthood from eighteen to seventeen. That'll save a full fifth of all the kids marked for unwinding."

"That's good," says Lev.

Pastor Dan reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "I wasn't going to show you this, but I think you need to see it. I think you need to understand where things have gone."

It's the cover of a magazine.

Lev's on it.

Not just on it, Lev *is* the cover. It's his seventh-grade baseball picture—mitt in hand, smiling at the camera. The headline reads, WHY, LEV, WHY? In all the time he's had here alone to think and rethink his actions, it never occurred to him that the outside world had been doing the same thing. He doesn't want this attention, but now he's apparently on a first-name basis with the world.

"You've been on the cover of just about every magazine."

He didn't need to know that. He hopes that Pastor Dan doesn't have a whole collection of them in his pocket. "So what," Lev says, trying to act as if it doesn't matter. "Clappers always make the news."

"Their *actions* make the news—the destruction they've caused—but nobody ever cares who a clapper is. To the public all clappers are the same. But you're different from those others, Lev. You're a clapper who didn't clap."

"I wanted to."

"If you wanted to, you would have. But instead you ran into the wreckage and pulled out four people."

"Three."

"Three—but you probably would have gone in for more if you could have. The other tithes, they all stayed back. They protected their own precious parts. But you basically led that rescue effort, because there were 'terribles' who followed you in to bring out survivors."

Lev remembers that. Even as the mob was crashing down the gate, there were dozens of Unwinds going back into the wreckage with him. And Pastor Dan is right—Lev would have kept going back in, but then it occurred to him that one false move would have set him off and brought the rest of the Chop Shop down around them. So he went back out to the red carpet and sat with Risa and Connor until ambulances took them away. Then he stood in the midst of the chaos and confessed to being a clapper. He confessed over and over again to anyone willing to listen, until finally a police officer kindly offered to arrest him. The officer was afraid to even handcuff Lev for fear of detonating him, but that was all right—he had no intention of resisting arrest.

"What you did, Lev—it confused people. No one knows whether you're a monster or a hero."

Lev thinks about that. "Is there a third choice?"

Pastor Dan doesn't answer him. Maybe he doesn't know the answer. "I have to believe that things happen for a reason. Your kidnapping, your becoming a clapper, your refusing to clap"—he glances at the magazine cover in his hand—"it's all led to this. For years, Unwinds were just faceless kids that no one wanted—but now you've put a face on unwinding."

"Can they put my face on someone else?"

Pastor Dan chuckles again, and this time it's not as forced as before. He looks at Lev like he's just a kid, and not something inhuman. It makes him feel, if only for a moment, like a normal thirteen-year-old. It's a strange feeling, because even in his old life he never really was a normal kid. Tithes never are.

"So, what happens now?" Lev asks.

"The way I understand it, they'll clear the worst of the explosive out of your bloodstream in a few weeks. You'll still be volatile, but not as bad as before. You can clap all you want and you won't explode—but I wouldn't play any contact sports for a while."

"And then they'll unwind me?"

Pastor Dan shakes his head. "They won't unwind a clapper—that stuff never entirely gets out of your system. I've been talking to your lawyer. He has a feeling they're going to offer you a deal—after all, you did help them catch that group who gave you the transfusion to begin with. Those people who used you, they'll get what they deserve. But the courts are likely to see you as a victim."

"I knew what I was doing," Lev tells him.

"Then tell me why you did it."

Lev opens his mouth to speak but he can't put it into words. Anger. Betrayal. Fury at a universe pretending to be fair and just. But was that really a reason? Was that justification?

"You may be responsible for your actions," Pastor Dan says, "but it's not your fault you weren't emotionally prepared for life out there in the real world. That was *my* fault—and the fault of everyone who raised you to be a tithe. We're as guilty as the people who pumped that poison into your blood." He looks away in shame, curbing his own growing anger, but Lev can tell it's not anger aimed at him. He takes a deep breath and continues. "The way the winds are blowing, you'll probably serve a few years of juvenile detention, then a few more years of house arrest."

Lev knows he should be relieved by this, but the feeling is slow in coming. He considers the idea of house arrest. "Whose house?" he asks.

He can tell Pastor Dan reads everything between the lines of that question. "You have to understand, Lev, your parents are the kind of people who can't bend without breaking."

"Whose house?"

Pastor Dan sighs. "When your parents signed the unwind order, you became a ward of the state. After what happened at the harvest camp,

the state offered to return custody to your parents, but they refused it. I'm sorry."

Lev is not surprised. He's horrified, but not surprised. Thoughts of his parents bring up the old feelings that drove him crazy enough to become a clapper. But now he finds that sense of despair is no longer bottomless. "So is my last name 'Ward' now?"

"Not necessarily. Your brother Marcus is petitioning for guardianship. If he gets it, you'll be in his care whenever they let you go. So you'll still be a Calder . . . that is, if you want to be."

Lev nods his approval, thinking back to his tithing party and how Marcus was the only one to stand up for him. Lev hadn't understood it at the time. "My parents disowned Marcus, too." At least he knows he'll be in good company.

Pastor Dan straightens out his shirt and shivers a bit from the cold. He doesn't really look like himself today. This is the first time Lev has seen him without his pastor's clothes. "Why are you dressed like that, anyway?"

He takes a moment before he answers. "I resigned my position. I left the church."

The thought of Pastor Dan being anything but Pastor Dan throws Lev for a loop. "You . . . you lost your faith?"

"No," he says, "just my convictions. I still very much believe in God—just not a god who condones human tithing."

Lev begins to feel himself choking up with an unexpected flood of feeling, all the emotions that had been building up throughout their talk—throughout the weeks—arriving all at once, like a sonic boom. "I never knew that was a choice."

All his life there was only one thing Lev was allowed to believe. It had surrounded him, cocooned him, constricted him with the same stifling softness as the layers of insulation around him now. For the first time in his life, Lev feels those bonds around his soul begin to loosen.

"You think maybe I can believe in that God, too?"

OceanofPDF.com

69 · Unwinds

There's a sprawling ranch in west Texas.

The money to build it came from oil that had long since dried up, but the money remained and multiplied. Now there's a whole compound, an oasis as green as a golf course in the middle of the flat, wild plains. This is where Harlan Dunfee grew to the age of sixteen, finding trouble along the way. He was arrested for disorderly behavior twice in Odessa, but his father, a big-shot admiral, got him off both times. The third time, his parents came up with a different solution.

Today is Harlan Dunfee's twenty-sixth birthday. He's having a party. Of sorts.

There are hundreds of guests at Harlan's party. One of them is a boy by the name of Zachary, though his friends know him as Emby. He's been living here at the ranch for some time now, waiting for this day. He has Harlan's right lung. Today, he gives it back to Harlan.

* * *

At the same time, six hundred miles to the west a wide-bodied jet lands in an airplane graveyard. The jet is full of crates, and each crate contains four Unwinds. As the crates are opened, a teenage boy peers out of one, not sure what to expect. He's faced by a flashlight, and when the flashlight lowers he can see that it's not an adult who opened the crate but another kid. He wears khaki clothes and he smiles at them, showing braces on a set of teeth that don't seem to need them. "Hi, my name's Hayden, and I'll be your rescuer today," he announces. "Is everyone safe and sound in there?"

"We're fine," says the young Unwind. "Where are we?"

"Purgatory," says Hayden. "Also known as Arizona."

The young Unwind steps out of the crate, terrified of what might be in store for him. He stands in the processional of kids being herded along, and, against Hayden's warning, bangs his head on the door of

the cargo hold as he steps out. The harsh light of day and the blistering heat assault him as he walks down a ramp to the ground. He can tell this isn't an airport, and yet there are planes everywhere.

In the distance a golf cart rolls toward them, kicking up a plume of red dust. The crowd falls silent as it approaches. As it comes to a stop, the driver steps out. He's a man with serious scars over half of his face. The man speaks quietly for a moment with Hayden, then addresses the crowd.

It's then that the young Unwind realizes this is not a man but just another kid, one not much older than himself. Perhaps it's the scars on his face that make him look older—or maybe it's just the way he carries himself.

"Let me be the first to welcome you all to the Graveyard," he says. "Officially, my name is E. Robert Mullard. . . ." He smiles. "But everyone calls me Connor."

* * *

The Admiral never returned to the Graveyard. His health would not allow it. Instead, he's at his family's Texas ranch, in the care of a wife who left him years before. Although he's weak and can't get around well anymore, he hasn't changed much. "The doctors say only 25 percent of my heart is still alive," he tells anyone who asks. "It'll do."

What has kept him alive more than anything else is the prospect of Harlan's big party. You could say that those terrifying stories about "Humphrey Dunfee" are true. At last, all his parts have been found, all the recipients have been gathered. But there will be no surgeries here —in spite of the rumors, rebuilding Harlan piece by piece was never the plan. But the Dunfees *are* putting their son together in the only meaningful way they can.

He's here even now, as the Admiral and his wife step into their garden. He's in the voices of their many party guests, talking and laughing. There are men and women of all ages. Each wears a name tag, but there are no names on those tags. Today, names are unimportant.

RIGHT HAND reads the sticker on one young man's lapel. He couldn't be any older than twenty-five.

"Let me see," says the Admiral.

The man holds out his hand. The Admiral looks it over until he finds a scar between the thumb and forefinger. "I took Harlan fishing when he was nine. He got that scar trying to gut a trout."

And then there's a voice from behind him—another man, a little bit older than the first.

"I remember!" he says. The Admiral smiles. Perhaps the memories are spread out, but they're here—every one of them.

He catches that boy who insists on calling himself Emby milling around at the edge of the garden by himself, wheezing less now that he's finally been put on the proper asthma medication. "What are you doing over here?" the Admiral asks. "You should be over with the others."

"I don't know anybody."

"Yes, you do," says the Admiral. "You just don't realize it yet." And he leads Emby toward the crowd.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the airplane graveyard, Connor speaks to the new arrivals as they stand outside the jet that brought them here. Connor is amazed that they listen to him. He's amazed that he actually commands their respect. He'll never get used to that.

"You're all here because you were marked for unwinding but managed to escape, and, thanks to the efforts of many people, you've found your way here. This will be your home until you turn seventeen and become a legal adult. That's the good news. The bad news is that they know all about us. They know where we are and what we're doing. They let us stay here because they don't see us as a threat."

And then Connor smiles.

"Well, we're going to change that."

As Connor talks, he makes eye contact with every one of them, making sure he remembers each of their faces. Making sure each of them feels recognized. Unique. Important.

"Some of you have been through enough and just want to survive to seventeen," he tells them. "I don't blame you. But I know that some of you are ready to risk everything to end unwinding once and for all."

"Yeah," screams a kid from the back, and pumping his fist in the air he begins chanting, "Happy Jack! Happy Jack!" A few kids join in, until everyone realizes this is not what Connor wants. The chants quickly die down.

"We will not be blowing up chop shops," he says. "We're not going to feed into their image of us as violent kids who are better off unwound. We will *think* before we act—and that's going to make it difficult for them. We'll infiltrate harvest camps and unite Unwinds across the country. We'll free kids from buses, before they even arrive. We will have a voice, and we will use it. We will make ourselves heard." Now the crowd can't hold back their cheers, and this time Connor allows it. These kids have been beaten down by life, but there's an energy now in the Graveyard that's beginning to fill each and every one of them. Connor remembers that feeling. He had it when he first arrived here.

"I don't know what happens to our consciousness when we're unwound," says Connor. "I don't even know when that consciousness starts. But I do know this." He pauses to make sure all of them are listening. "We have a right to our lives!"

The kids go wild.

"We have a right to choose what happens to our bodies!"

The cheers reach fever pitch.

"We deserve a world where both those things are possible—and it's our job to help make that world."

* * *

Meanwhile, excitement is also building at the Dunfee ranch. The buzz of conversations around the garden grows to a roar as more and more people connect. Emby shares his experiences with a girl who has the left match to his right lung. A woman talks about a movie she never saw, with a man who remembers the friends he never saw it with. And as the Admiral and his wife watch, something amazing happens.

The conversations begin to converge!

Like water vapor crystalizing into the magnificent, unique form of a snowflake, the babble of voices coalesces into a single conversation.

"Look over there! He fell off that wall when he was—"

"—six! Yes—I remember!"

"He had to wear a wrist brace for months."

"The wrist still hurts when it rains."

"He shouldn't have climbed the wall."

"I had to—I was being chased by a bull."

"I was so scared!"

"The flowers in that field—do you smell them?"

"They remind me of that one summer—"

"—when my asthma wasn't so bad—"

"—and I felt like I could do anything."

"Anything!"

"And the world was just waiting for me!"

The Admiral grips his wife's arm. Neither can hold back their tears —not tears of sorrow but of awe. If the rest of his heart were to stop now, in this moment, the Admiral would die more content than any man on Earth.

He looks at the crowd and says weakly, "H-Harlan?"

Every eye in the garden turns toward him. A man raises his hand to his throat, touching it gently, and says in a voice that is most definitely Harlan Dunfee's, just a bit older, "Dad?"

The Admiral is so overwhelmed by emotion he cannot speak, and so his wife looks at the man before her, at the people beside her, at the crowd all around her, and she says:

"Welcome home."

* * *

Six hundred miles away, in the airplane graveyard, a girl plays a grand piano sheltered beneath the wing of a battered jet that was once Air Force One. She plays with a rare sort of joy in defiance of her wheelchair, and her sonata lifts the spirits of all the new arrivals. She smiles at them as they go by and continues to play, making it clear that

this furnace of a place, full of planes that cannot fly, is more than it seems. It is a womb of redemption for every Unwind, and for all those who fought the Heartland War and lost—which was everybody.

Connor lets Risa's music fill him as he watches the new arrivals being greeted by the thousands of kids already here. The sun has begun to set, taking the edge off the heat, and the rows of jets at this time of day create pleasing patterns of shadow on the hard earth. Connor has to smile. Even a place as harsh as this can be beautiful in a certain light.

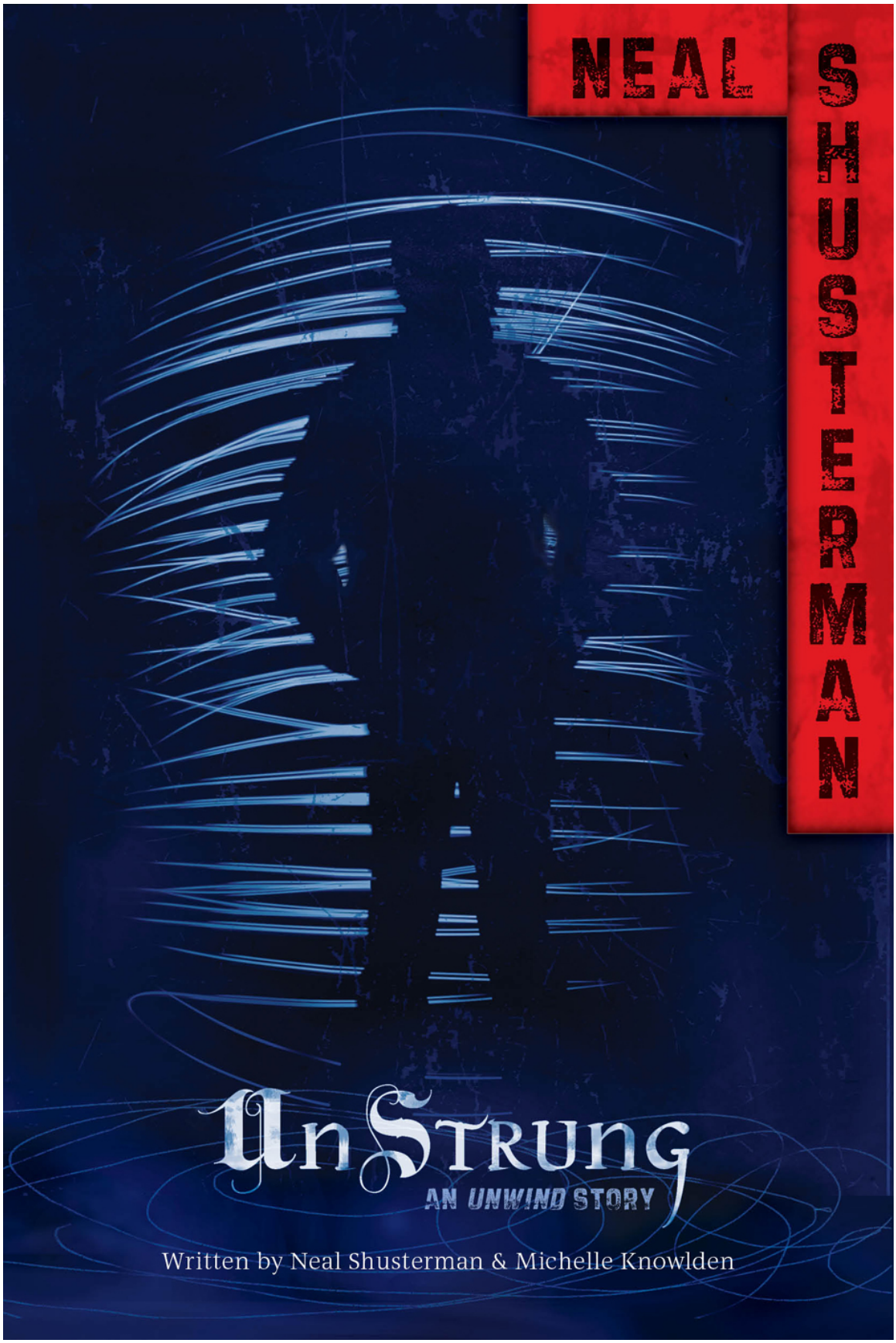
Connor takes it all in—the music, the voices, the desert, and the sky. He has his work cut out for him, changing the world and all, but things are already in motion; all he has to do is keep up the momentum. And he doesn't have to do it alone. He has Risa, Hayden, and every Unwind here. Connor takes a deep breath and releases it along with his tension. At last, he allows himself the wonderful luxury of hope.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

Neal Shusterman is the author of many novels for young adults, including The Skinjacker Trilogy, and *Downsiders*, which was nominated for twelve state reading awards. He also writes screenplays for motion pictures and television shows such as *Animorphs* and *Goosebumps*. The father of four children, Neal lives in southern California. Visit him at storyman.com.

OceanofPDF.com


NEAL
SHUSTERMAN
UnStrung
AN UNWIND STORY
Written by Neal Shusterman & Michelle Knowlden

OceanofPDF.com

UnStrung

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Neal Shusterman

NOVELS

Antsy Does Time

Bruiser

The Dark Side of Nowhere

Dissidents

Downsiders

The Eyes of Kid Midas

Full Tilt

The Schwa Was Here

The Shadow Club

The Shadow Club Rising

Speeding Bullet

What Daddy Did

THE UNWIND TRILOGY

Unwind

UnWholly

THE SKINJACKER TRILOGY

Everlost

Everwild

Everfound

THE STAR SHARDS CHRONICLES

Scorpion Shards

Thief of Souls

Shattered Sky

THE DARK FUSION SERIES

Dread Locks

Red Rider's Hood

Duckling Ugly

STORY COLLECTIONS

Darkness Creeping

MindQuakes

MindStorms

MindBenders

Visit the author at storyman.com and facebook.com/nealshusterman

OceanofPDF.com

Have you ever wondered what happened
to Lev from the time he left CyFi
until he showed up at the Graveyard?

UnStrung

AN *UNWIND* STORY

by Neal Shusterman & Michelle Knowlden

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

OceanofPDF.com

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Neal Shusterman

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at
www.simonspeakers.com.

The text for this book is set in Fairfield.

ISBN 978-1-4424-7277-8 (eBook)

OceanofPDF.com

1 • Lev

"Do it for him," a woman says, her voice quiet but steeped in authority.

Mired in a numbing gray fog, Lev feels her cool fingers on his neck, taking his pulse. His throat hurts, his tongue feels like chewed leather, his left wrist aches, and he can't open his eyes.

"Not yet, Ma."

Like his eyes, Lev's lips won't open. Who is it who just spoke? Maybe one of his brothers. Marcus, perhaps? No, the voice is wrong. And no one in his family is so informal as to call their mother "Ma."

"All right," he hears the woman say. "You decide when he's ready. And don't forget your guitar."

The sound of footsteps recedes, and Lev slips back into darkness.

•

When he wakes again, his eyes open, but only a sliver. He's alone in a large bedroom with blinding-white walls. A red, woven blanket covers him. Beneath him he can feel a smooth and expensive cotton sheet, like the ones he once knew. He's on a bed that's low to the ground, and beyond its foot he sees the fur of a mountain lion on the slate floor. He shudders at the sight of it. An oak bureau faces him. It has no mirror, and for the moment he's glad.

Forcing his eyes wider, he sees unshuttered windows on the far wall, the light beyond them weakening to dusk. Or is it strengthening to dawn? There is a nightstand next to him. A stethoscope is coiled there, and for a brief, devastating moment he thinks that he's been discovered and taken to a harvest camp. Despair presses him against the cotton sheet, and he sinks into the fog that fills his head, confusing dreams with delirium and making a mockery of time. He drifts through the fog until he hears—

"When he wakes, get his name." It's a different voice. Deeper. "The council can't give him sanctuary without a name."

Cool fingers touch his wrist again. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He senses the woman leaning over him. He can hear her breathing. She smells of sage and smoky cottonwood. It’s comforting. “Now leave us be.”

He feels a prick in his upper arm, like a tranq dart, but not. The world goes hazy—but not like the fog. This is a different kind of sleep.

Suddenly he’s standing in a yard, near a briefcase covered in mud that lies halfway down a hole. Outside the picket fence, police are sidling toward him. No, it’s not him they’re interested in—it’s the skinny umber kid with him. CyFi’s hands overflow with gold chains and glittering stones of every color. He’s pleading with the sienna-colored man and woman, who clutch each other, staring at the kid in terror.

“Please don’t unwind me.” CyFi’s words are hoarse and choked with sobs. “Please don’t unwind me. . . .”

A cool hand touches Lev’s cheek, and the memory is sucked in like a mental gasp. He left CyFi days ago. He’s somewhere else now.

“You’re safe, child,” the woman’s reassuring voice says. “Open your eyes.”

When he does, he sees her pleasant face smiling at him. Square jaw, black hair tied back, and bronze skin, she’s a—“SlotMonger!” he blurts, and feels his skin flush red. “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean . . . It just came out . . .”

She chuckles. “Old words die hard,” she tells him, with infinite understanding. “We were called Indians long after it was obvious we weren’t from India. And ‘Native American’ was always a bit too condescending for my taste.”

“ChanceFolk,” Lev says, hoping his SlotMonger slur will quickly be forgotten.

“Yes,” the woman says. “People of Chance. Of course the casinos are long gone, but I suppose the name had enough resonance to stick.”

He sees the stethoscope around her neck—the one he at first incorrectly thought belonged to a harvest-camp surgeon.

“You’re a doctor?”

“A Woman of Medicine, yes—and as such I can tell you that your cuts and bruises are healing, and the swelling of your wrist is much reduced. Leave the brace on till I give you leave to shed it. You need to gain a few pounds, but once you taste my husband’s cooking, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Lev watches warily as she sits on the edge of his bed and studies him.

“But your spirit, child, is a vastly different matter.”

He withdraws, and her lips purse ruefully.

“Medicine women know that healing takes time, some more time than others. Tell me one thing, and I’ll leave you to rest.”

He stiffens, reflexively on his guard. “What?”

“What is your name?”

“Lev Calder,” he says, and regrets it immediately. It’s been almost three weeks since he was dragged by Connor from his limo, but the Powers That Be are still looking for him. It was one thing to be traveling with CyFi, but to give a doctor his name—what if she turns him over to the Juvenile Authority? He thinks of his parents, and the destiny he left behind. How could he have wanted to be unwound? How could his parents have made him want it? It fills him with an unrelenting fury at everyone and everything. He’s not a tithe anymore. He’s an AWOL now. He’d better start thinking like one.

“Well, Lev, we’re petitioning the Tribal Council to allow you to stay. You don’t have to tell me all you’ve been through—I’m sure it was horrible.” And then her eyes brighten. “But we People of Chance do believe in people of *second* chance.”

OceanofPDF.com

2 • Wil

He stands in the doorway watching the boy sleep. His guitar hangs down his back, warm from the sun, strings still humming.

He doesn't mind being here, though he was sorry to have to leave the forest. His time accompanying the sounds of shivering leaves, whirling dust devils, and powerful Chinook winds was special to him. There was calming joy in transposing nature to music. Adapting the chords of yellow-shouldered blackbirds, prairie dogs, and wild pigs. Bringing their voices into each movement he played.

Wil brought Dad's leftover blackberry crumble to the forest with him. Una brought some elk jerky and a thermos of cinnamon-spiced chocolate. She sat with him beneath a spreading oak while he played, although she left before he finished, as it was her turn to clean the workshop.

His guitar always sounds a little melancholy when Una leaves.

The AWOL boy that his mother has taken into their home has been awake for a day now, but he hasn't come down for anything, even meals. Dad offered to carry him, but Ma said he needed more time.

"Can't fret over AWOLs," his father told her. "They never stay long, and they're too desperate to be grateful." But Ma just ignores him. She's taken the boy under her protection, and that is that.

Wil wonders how the boy can sleep when the sun blasts from the windows over his head and the roar of tribal construction in town echoes down the ravine. The boy's chest rises and falls, and then his legs churn beneath the sheets as if he's running. Wil is not surprised: AWOLs know much about running. Sometimes he thinks that's all they know.

Wil is confident the boy will be calmed. Wild animals, rattlesnakes, and feral teenagers go quiet in Wil's presence. Even when his guitar hangs silent on his back, his presence calms them—perhaps in anticipation of what he'll deliver. Although Wil's just a teenager

himself, he's got old-soul style, a storyteller vibe that he got from his grandfather—

But he doesn't want to think about his grandfather now.

While he considers what music may reach this AWOL, the boy wakes. His wide pupils constrict, revealing pale blue eyes that focus on Wil standing in the doorway.

Wil takes a few steps into the room and sits cross-legged on the mountain-lion skin, swinging his guitar into his lap in a single, practiced movement.

"My name's Chowilawu," he tells the boy. "But everyone calls me Wil."

The boy stares at him guardedly. "I heard you talking yesterday. The medicine woman is your mom?"

He nods. The kid looks about thirteen—three years younger than Wil—but something about his eyes makes him seem like he's going on one hundred. More old-soul style, but of the world-weary kind. Life has done a number on this AWOL.

"Okay if I play my guitar here?" Wil asks, his voice as gentle as he can make it.

The boy squints suspiciously. "Why?"

Wil shrugs. "It's easier for me than talking."

The boy hesitates, chewing on his lip. "Sure, okay."

It starts that way with them. Being an AWOL breaks kids' spirits—makes them distrustful of the world. But since they can't see the trickery in listening to a guitar, or how Wil's music breaks through barriers that betrayal built, they surrender, listening to his fingers caress the strings, his music finally gives voice to their souls' sorrow.

His ma took a music-therapy seminar at Johns Hopkins, but she only knows its theories. Wil has seen how music heals since the day he picked up a guitar on his third birthday. Not all the AWOLs and not all ChanceFolk with sick spirits heal, though. Some are too far gone. Too early to tell into which camp this boy will fall.

Wil plays for two straight hours, until he smells lunch and feels the cramp in his back. The AWOL sits on the bed, having been awake and listening the whole time. His arms are wrapped around his legs; his

chin rests on his knees; his eyes stare at the blanket. The chords of Wil's music fade to silence.

"Time to eat." Wil gets to his feet, his guitar swinging over his shoulder to hang down his back. "Probably soup and cornbread. You coming down?"

The boy reminds him of a rabbit, frozen, trapped between staying or fleeing. Wil waits, letting the quiet hum in widening ripples till the boy unwraps his arms from his legs and gets off the bed, standing straighter than Wil expected he would.

"My name's Lev. I was a tithe."

Wil accepts this with a nod and no judgment. Maybe this kid will be okay after all.

OceanofPDF.com

3 • Lev

Lev watches Wil wash the dishes after lunch, still thinking about what possessed him to tell Wil that he's a runaway tithe. Giving out too much information can only make things worse for him. Then a dish towel hits him in the face and drops to the counter.

"Hey." Lev glares at Wil, wondering if it was thrown in anger. Wil may be big as a bear, but he has a teddy-bear grin.

"You can dry the dishes. Meet me at the end of the hall when you finish."

Lev never did dishes at home: That was the servants' job. He's been sick, too. Who makes sick people dry dishes? Still, he does the job. He owes Wil for the one-man concert. He'd never heard guitar playing like that before—and Lev's folks were big on the arts, making sure their kids had violin lessons, listening to the Cincinnati Pops most Thursday nights.

But Wil's music was different. It was . . . real. For two hours, and strictly from memory, Wil played a little Bach, Schubert, and Elton, but he mostly played Spanish guitar.

Lev thought such wild, complex music would be too hard to listen to in his weakened state, but it was just the opposite. The music lulled him until it seemed to sing through his synapses: notes rising, sweetening, spinning in perfect synchronicity with his thoughts.

He hangs the towel after he finishes drying the dishes, and thinks about going back to his room, but he's curious about Wil. He finds him at the end of the hall, closing his bedroom door and putting on a light jacket. He looks somehow incomplete without his guitar. Evidently, Wil feels the same. His hand fingers the doorknob; then with a sigh he opens the door again and retrieves his guitar, and a jacket for Lev, too.

"Are we going somewhere?" Lev asks.

"Here and there." Which seems a logical answer for a guy like Wil, but the answer makes Lev think about being unwound. The dispersal

of every piece of him. Here and there. Lev climbed the rez wall desperate for some sort of sanctuary, but what if he put too much faith in rumors?

"Is it true that reservations are safe for AWOLs?" he asks. "Is it true that People of Chance don't unwind?"

Wil nods. "We never signed the Unwind Accord. So not only don't we unwind, we also can't use unwound parts."

Lev mulls that over, baffled at how a society could work without harvesting organs. "So . . . where do you get parts?"

"Nature provides," Wil says. "Sometimes." An enigmatic look crosses Wil's face like a shadow behind his eyes. "C'mon, I'll show you around the rez."

Moments later they stand on an open balcony, staring down almost four stories to a dry creek below. Across the ravine are other houses, also hewn right out of the red stone wall. They appear to be of ancient design, yet somehow modern and carved with diamond precision. New-world technology serving ancestral respect.

"Not scared of heights, are you?" Wil doesn't wait for an answer, but makes sure his guitar strap has his instrument secure on his back, then hops on a rope ladder. He climbs down, sometimes sliding for yards at a time.

Lev swallows nervously, but not as nervously as he might have three weeks ago. Lately he's been doing plenty of dangerous things. He waits till Wil reaches the bottom; then he grits his teeth and follows him. With his left wrist still in a brace, it's hard, and his stomach rolls every time he looks down, but Lev grins when he reaches bottom, realizing why Wil made him do this. The first thing an AWOL loses is his dignity. By allowing Lev to climb the rope alone, Wil gave his dignity back to him.

When Lev turns to Wil, he's surprised to see that they're not alone.

"Lev, this is my uncle Pivane."

Lev cautiously shakes the large man's hand, keeping an eye on the shiny tranq rifle cradled in his left arm. His deerskins are worn, and the long graying hair escaping from its rawhide knot makes him look scruffy—but there is no mistaking the designer quality of his boots or

the Swiss watch on his wrist. And that rifle with its fine zebrawood stock was probably custom-made.

"How did today's hunt go?" Wil asks. It should be a casual question, but Lev catches how intently Wil looks at his uncle.

"Tranq'd a lioness, but had to let her go: She was nursing." Pivane rubs his eyes. "We're heading to Cash Out Gulch in the morning. Rumors of a male down there. You coming with us for once?"

Wil doesn't answer, and Lev wonders at the sly look Pivane gives his nephew. Lev assumed all ChanceFolk hunted, but maybe that's just a myth. Just like everything else in his life has been.

Pivane spares a glance at Lev. "You look better than when I found you. That arm okay?"

"Yeah. Better. Thanks for saving me." Lev can't remember being rescued. He can't remember much after dropping off the wall except the sharp pain in his wrist, then lying in the leaves and pine needles, certain that this was what dying felt like.

Pivane's gaze sharpens on Wil's guitar. "Are you going down to the medical warren today? Are you going to visit your grandfather?"

"Maybe not" is all Wil says.

The man's voice roughens, becoming almost an accusation. "Medicine folk and musicians don't get to choose who their hands heal. Or whose way they smooth for dying." Then he points a finger at Wil. "You do it for him, Chowilawu." A moment of uneasy eye contact between them; then Pivane takes a step back and shifts his rifle. "Tell your grandfather we'll bag a heart for him tomorrow." Then he nods a solemn good-bye to Lev and leaves, using not the ropes but an elevator that Lev did not see, and Wil did not see fit to show him.

■

They walk into the village. Lev, so used to bland sienna suburbia, feels out of place among the red cliff homes, the whitewashed adobes, and the sidewalks of rich mahogany planks. Although the place appears at first to be primitive, Lev knows upper crust when he sees it, from the luxury cars parked on the side streets to the gold plaques embedded in

the adobe walls. Men and women wear business suits that are clearly Chance-Folk in style, yet finer than the best designer fashions.

"What do your people do here?"

Wil throws him an amused look. "My people as in 'Slot-Mongers' in general, or are you asking about my family in particular?"

Lev reddens, wondering if the medicine woman told Wil how he'd accidently called the ChanceFolk by the rude slang name. "Both, I guess."

"Didn't do your homework before scaling our wall?"

"I needed a place to hide and had no time to be choosy. A kid at a train station told me that since your people are protected, I would be protected too. And that you know the legal mumbo jumbo to make it stick."

Wil relents and offers Lev a brief history of the tribe. "When my grandfather was a kid, the rez made a bundle—not just from gaming, but from some lawsuits over land usage, a water treatment plant, a wind farm that went haywire, and casinos we didn't want but got stuck with when another tribe rolled on us." He shrugs uncomfortably. "Luck of the draw. We've got it better than some tribes."

Lev looks down the street, where the curbs gleam with gold. "Way better, by the look of it."

"Yah," says Wil, looking both embarrassed and proud at the same time. "Some tribes did wise investing with their casino cash; others squandered it. Then, when the virtual casinos got ritzier than the real ones and it all came crashing down, tribes like ours did very well. We're a Hi-Rez. You're lucky you didn't jump the wall of a Low-Rez. They're much more likely to sell AWOLs to parts pirates."

Lev has, of course, heard of the wealth chasm between the rich tribes and the poor ones, but as it was never a part of his world, he never gave it much thought. Maybe people this rich don't need to profit off AWOLs. Still, he tries not to let his spark of hope ignite. He has quickly learned that hope is a luxury the hunted can ill afford.

"Anyway," says Wil, "my tribe knows the law and how to use it. In fact my dad's a lawyer, and has done pretty well for our family. My mom runs the pediatrics lodge in the medical warren and is well

respected. We get rich tribal kids from all over North America coming here for healing."

Lev wonders at the irony in Wil's voice but feels awkward about asking him more questions. His mother always told him it was rude to talk about money, especially if you didn't know the person well. But on the other hand, after listening to Wil play the guitar for him, he feels he knows him better than much of his own family.

Wil stops before a small storefront at the end of the street. A carved oak sign says LUTHIER. He tries the handle, but it's locked. "Huh. I wanted to introduce you to my fiancée, but I guess she's taking a break."

"Fiancée?"

"Yah," says Wil. "It's like that around here."

Lev looks up at the sign above the door, feeling increasingly ignorant. "So . . . what's a luthier?"

"Guitar maker. Una is an apprentice to the rez's best."

"You mean there's more than one?"

"It's kind of a tribal specialty." Wil looks around, clearly disappointed, and Lev realizes this was less about showing him around than about showing him off to his fiancée. "Ready to go back yet?"

But Lev is tired of hibernating at Wil's house. Besides, if that petition is approved, this could be his new home. The thought gives him a strange chill: excitement laced with fear of a future so new and unknown. There have never been unknown quantities in his life. Until a few weeks ago, everything was carefully laid out for him, so he never needed to consider the concept of possibilities. But now there are possibilities enough to make him dizzy.

"Show me more. How about your schools? What kind of school would I go to?"

Wil shakes his head, laughing. "You really don't know anything about us, do you?"

Lev doesn't dignify that with a response—he just waits for an explanation.

"Very young kids learn what they need to know from extended family and the neighborhood elders," Wil explains. "Then, as their

talents and passions are recognized, they're apprenticed to a master in the field, whatever that field is."

"Seems kind of narrow to learn only one thing."

"We learn many things, from many people," Wil says, "as opposed to your world, where you're taught all the same things, by the same people."

Lev nods, point taken. "Advantages and disadvantages to both, I guess."

Lev thinks Wil will just defend his tribe's ways, but instead he says, "Agreed." Then he adds, "I don't always like the way things are done here, but the way we learn works for us. It even prepares kids for university every bit as well as your system. We learn because we want to, not because we have to, so we learn faster. We learn deeper."

Then Lev hears a young voice behind him.

"Chowilawu?"

Lev turns around to see three kids, maybe about ten years old, staring admiringly at Wil. The kid who spoke is skinny as an arrow, and just as tightly wound. He has a pleading look on his face.

"Something wrong, Kele?" Wil asks.

"No . . . it's just . . . Elder Muna asks if you'll play for us."

Wil sighs but grins, as if he feels put upon and flattered at the same time. "Elder Muna knows I'm not permitted to play lightly. There must be a need."

"It's Nova," Kele says, indicating a girl beside him, her eyes downcast. "Ever since her father divorced his spirit-guide, her parents have been fighting."

"It's bad," Nova blurts out. "My ma says she married an eagle, not a possum—but he was the only accountant in his office who wasn't a possum. So now they fight."

Lev wants to laugh, but realizes that this is no laughing matter.

"So shouldn't I play for your parents, not you?" Wil asks her.

"They won't ask," Nova says. "But maybe some of what you give me will rub off on them."

Wil looks to Lev, offers him a shrug, and agrees to perform. "Not too long," he tells them. "Our new *mahpee* can't have too much

excitement on his first waking day."

Lev looks at him, puzzled.

"*Mahpee* is short for 'sky faller.' It's what we call AWOLs who climb the wall and drop into the rez as if they've fallen from the sky."

Elder Muna, a white-haired woman, meets them at the door a few streets away, clasping Wil's hands with both of hers, asking him about his parents. Lev looks around the round room with its many windows. The maps on the walls and the computer stations make the place resemble a classroom, but only slightly. A dozen children mill about in what appears to be total mayhem: Two argue over a helix on one monitor, one child traces a path on a map of Africa, four act out a play that could be *Macbeth* if Lev remembers his Shakespeare correctly, and except for the three who have shanghaied Wil, the rest are playing some complicated game on the floor with a pile of pebbles.

Elder Muna claps once, and the children instantly look her way, see Wil, and swarm him. He shoos them away, and they stampede to the center of the room, jostling for the best place on the floor. Wil settles on a stool, and all the kids start shouting their favorites at him. But Elder Muna silences them with a raised hand.

"The gift is for Nova today. She will choose."

"The Crow and Sparrow song," Nova says, trying to hide her delight with a solemn expression.

The song is markedly different from the music Wil played for Lev. This tune is bright and joyous, evoking perhaps a different kind of healing. Lev closes his eyes and imagines himself a bird flitting through summer leaves in an orchard that seems to go on forever. The music captures, if only for a few moments, a sense of an innocence recently lost.

When the song is done, Lev raises his hands to clap, but Elder Muna, anticipating this, gently takes his hand before he can, and shakes her head no.

The group of kids sits in silence for a good thirty seconds, filled with the aftermath of the song. Then the elder releases them, and they all go back to their games and learning.

She thanks Wil and wishes Lev luck with his new journey, and they leave.

"You really are amazing," Lev tells him once they're out on the street. "I bet you could make millions outside the rez with your music."

"It would be nice," Wil says wistfully, almost sadly. "But we both know that's not going to happen."

Lev wonders at his sadness, because it seems to him if you never have to worry about unwinding, you can do anything. "Why no applause?" he asks. "Are people here that afraid of clappers?"

Wil laughs at that. "Believe it or not, we don't have clappers on the rez. I'd like to believe that's because people here don't get angry enough to become suicide bombers and make their blood explosive . . . but maybe it's just that we vent our anger at the world in different ways." Then he sighs and says, with more than a little bitterness, "No, we don't applaud because it's not our way. Applause is for the musician, and the musician is 'just an instrument.' Accepting applause is considered vanity." Then he looks at his guitar, stroking the strings with his fingertips, peering into its hollow, like maybe something will speak out from inside. "Every night I dream of cheering crowds and wake up guilty for it."

"Don't be," Lev tells him. "Where I come from, everyone wants to be cheered for something. It's normal."

"Ready to go back?"

Lev isn't sure whether he means Wil's home or back to the world outside of the rez. Well, Lev isn't ready to do either. He points down a winding path. "What's down there?"

Wil huffs, his mood clearly darkened by Lev's talk of adoration. "Why do you need to see everything? Maybe there are some places it's best not to go!"

Lev stares at the ground, feeling more hurt by the rebuke than he wants to admit.

When he looks up, Wil is staring with pain at the cliffs on the other side of the village, then down the winding path. "The medical warren is down there," he tells Lev. "It's where my mother works."

And then Lev recalls something. “And where your grandfather is?”

Wil nods, saying nothing for a moment . . . and then he takes off his guitar and leaves it hidden behind a boulder. “Come on. I’ll take you there.”

Lost in thought, Wil walks down the cobblestone road. His face looks grim, and Lev leaves him alone, wrapped in memories of his own. Clappers remind him of the last time he saw Connor and Risa, and guilt prickles him. They had rescued him, and in his own uneasy ambivalence between his past and his future, he had betrayed them. Connor and Risa had pretended to be clappers, solemnly applauding in grand, rhythmic sweeps—and it caused a panic. They had escaped. He hopes. The truth is, he has no idea what befell them. They could be unwound by now. In a “divided state.” The more he thinks about it, the more he despises that euphemism.

The road curves outside the village toward the wide fissure in the cliff and dips into a gulch filled with gleaming one-story buildings separated by greenbelts.

“This first building is the pediatrics lodge,” Wil explains tersely as they pass. Wil doesn’t stop, but Lev peers through the windows and into the patios, hoping to see the medicine woman. He sees other healers and groups of children, but not Wil’s ma.

Lev shoots a look at Wil and sees his eyes glued on someone ahead: a short girl with warm almond eyes, a cascade of feathers woven into her vest, and a faint smile that reminds Lev of Risa. She is standing in front of another medical lodge, stalling at the door, when she catches sight of Wil.

Even before they speak, Lev realizes that this must be Wil’s fiancée. There’s a connection between them perhaps even more powerful than Wil’s connection with his guitar. As Wil approaches her, Lev thinks they might kiss, but instead Wil reaches for the beaded ribbon restraining her hair and unties it, sending her shiny black locks cascading down her shoulders.

“Much better,” he says, with the slightest of smiles.

“Not for the workshop,” she points out. “It’ll wrap around a saw blade, and my head will get cut off.”

"Now that's what I call unwinding!" Wil says with a smirk. She gives him a glare that's more like a visual rim shot, and he laughs.

"Una, this is Lev. Lev, Una."

"Hi."

"Nice to meet you, Lev." She snatches at Wil's hand, but as he's a foot taller than her, he easily holds the ribbon out of reach. "Give it to me, Guitar Boy." Then, as if she's had years of practice, she leaps and yanks it from his hand. "Ha!" Winking at Lev, she says, "Take notes, little brother. If you hang with this one, you'll need that move."

Lev isn't sure why she's calling him little brother, but he feels pleased.

Una studies Wil. "Is your uncle back?"

Something intense passes between them. Lev notices that this long, narrow lodge has CARDIOLOGY carved in large wood letters above the door.

"Yah," Wil says. "Didn't find anything. So are you here to see my grandfather?"

"Someone has to," she says. "He's been here for weeks, and how many times have you visited?"

"Stop it, Una. It's bad enough I get it from my family."

"You get it because you deserve it."

"Well, I'm visiting now, aren't I?"

"Then where's your guitar?"

Something crumples in Wil's face, and Lev looks sideways, not wanting to see the tears building in his eyes. "Una, I can't do it. He wants me to soothe him into death. I just can't do it!"

"It doesn't mean he'll actually die."

Wil's voice gets louder. "He's waiting for me when he should be waiting for a heart."

And although Lev knows none of the particulars, he touches Wil on the arm to get his attention and says, "Maybe he's waiting for both . . . but he'll accept one if he can't have the other."

Wil looks at him like he's seeing him for the first time, and Una smiles. "Well said, little brother," says Una. "I suspect if you were one of us, your spirit-guide would be an owl."

Lev feels himself go just the tiniest bit red. “More like a deer in the headlights.”

Lev follows them inside and to the far end of the building, where a spacious round room is subdivided into four open enclaves. It feels less like a hospital and more like a spa. There are large windows framed in rough-hewn wood. Blooming flowers decorate the walls, and in the very center is a fountain gently drizzling water over a copper sculpture made to look like a stylized dream catcher. There is state-of-the-art medical equipment in each enclave, but discreetly placed, as not to disturb the calming nature of the place.

Of the four beds, only two are occupied. In the one closest to the door rests a young woman who breathes irregularly, her lips tinged blue. In the farthest bed is a gaunt old man, who looks tall even lying down. Lev stalls in the hallway with Wil and Una until Wil takes a deep breath and leads the way in, mustering a smile.

His grandfather is awake. Seeing them, he chuckles delightedly, but the laugh turns into a ragged cough.

“Grandfather, this is Ma’s patient Lev. Lev, this is my grandfather, Tocho.”

“Please sit,” Tocho says. “Keep standing around me and I’ll feel like I’m already dead.”

Lev sits with the others but scoots his plush chair slightly back, disturbed at how pasty the old man looks, his face drawn and his breathing ragged. Lev sees the family resemblance, and it unnerves him that this frail man probably looked like Wil sixty years ago. This man is dying for lack of a heart. It reminds Lev of the heart he might have provided someone. Did a person die because Lev kept his heart for himself? There’s still a part of him that wants to feel guilty for that, and it makes him angry.

Wil picks up his grandfather’s hand. “Uncle Pivane says he’ll bag a mountain lion tomorrow.”

“Always tomorrow with that one,” Tocho says. “And I suppose you’ll play for me tomorrow too?”

Wil reluctantly nods. Lev notices how he won’t meet the old man’s gaze. “I don’t have my guitar today. But yes, tomorrow for sure.”

Then Tocho wags a finger at Wil. “And no more talk of changing my guide to a pig.” He smiles hugely. “Not happ’nin’.”

Lev looks to Wil. “Pig?”

“Nova’s dad isn’t the only one who divorced his spirit-guide. My dad writes petitions to the Tribal Council all the time asking to switch people’s animal spirit-guides to something more . . . helpful. It’s no big deal.”

Tocho’s expression is mutinous. “Big deal to me. Lion chose me.” He turns weakly to Lev. “My grandson thinks I should change my spirit-guide to a pig, just so I can have a new heart quick and easy. What do you think?”

Wil throws Lev a forbidding look, but Una nods at Lev, giving him silent permission to voice an opinion. But how can he have an opinion? “This is all new to me,” Lev says. “I don’t think I would want an animal part . . . but sir, I think whatever lets you keep your dignity is the right thing to do.”

Wil’s frown is so severe, Lev backpedals.

“But on the other hand, a pig heart would be okay if it works. If I eat pork chops, I can’t object to you using its heart, can I?”

The old man starts to laugh-cough again.

“Uh . . . maybe I should wait outside.” Lev starts to get up, ready to make his escape, but Una stops him.

“You’ll do no such thing. It’s refreshing to hear an outsider’s view. Isn’t it, Wil?”

Wil considers it. “We can learn things from the outside, just as they can learn things from us. And if an old tradition ends your life before its time, then what good is it?” Then he turns to Lev, making him the mediator once more. “Not many mountain lions on the rez anymore, Lev. But there are plenty of pigs, mustangs, and sheep. It makes no sense to insist on a part from his animal spirit-guide. Choosing a different animal is simple logic. Shouldn’t a flush of logic beat a straight of tradition?”

Lev has no idea how to answer—and then he realizes he can fake his way out of this. “Neither,” he says. “In games of chance nobody wins but the house.”

A beat of silence, and Una throws her head back and laughs. “Definitely an owl,” she says.

Tocho locks his eyes on Wil. “I will hear you play tomorrow,” he says. “You will smooth the path of dying for me. You shame me by refusing. You shame yourself.”

“I will play for your healing only, Grandfather,” Wil says. “After you have a new heart.”

The old man stares stonily at his grandson, his earlier good humor gone. He turns toward the window, shutting them out. The visit is over.

■

“While your people focused on the business and science of unwinding, the tribal nations’ scientists worked on perfecting animal-to-human transplant technology,” Wil tells Lev on the way back to Wil’s cliff-side home. Una left Wil with a halfhearted kiss on the cheek and returned to the luthier workshop. Wil waited until she was gone before he retrieved his guitar. “We overcame organ rejection and other problems caused by interspecies transplant. The only thing we can’t use is animal brain tissue. Animals don’t think the way we do, and it just doesn’t take.”

“How come you didn’t share with our scientists?” Lev asks.

Wil looks at him as if it’s a stupid question. Maybe it is.

“We did. They weren’t interested,” Wil tells him. “In fact, your people condemned it as unethical, immoral, and just plain sick.”

Lev has to admit that a part of him—the part that was indoctrinated into a world where tithing and unwinding were accepted—agrees. Funny how morality, which always seems so black and white, can be influenced so completely by what you were raised to believe.

“Anyway,” Wil continues, “our legal powerhouse crafted an intricate set of laws, based on traditional belief systems, for using this technology. When ChanceFolk come of age, they take a vision quest and discover their spirit-guide, which can be anything from a bird to an insect to a larger animal. Of course, after the Council transplant

laws came down, it was amazing how many kids, coached by their parents, came up with pig guides."

Lev doesn't quite get it until Wil explains that, aside from primates, pigs are biologically closest to humans. "Mountain lion is a worse case," Wil says. "Endangered, vastly different biology than humans, and on top of it carnivores weren't created to last as long as plant eaters so the hearts give out quickly."

"So what's *your* spirit-guide?" Lev asks.

Wil laughs. "I'm even more screwed if ever I need an organ. It was a crow that spoke to me." And then he becomes silent for a moment. Pensive. The way he gets when he plays. "They call my music a gift but treat it like an obligation. I am shameful if I don't use it the way they see fit." He spits, leaving a dark spot on a boulder as they pass. "I would never accept a human part, little brother . . . but there are many things your world has to offer that I would take."

"Like a cheering crowd?"

Wil considers it. "Like . . . being appreciated."

OceanofPDF.com

4 • Wil

Wil knows he's opened up too much to Lev. An AWOL is supposed to open up to *them*, to find solace in their acceptance, not the other way around. He vows to shutter his heart a little more securely.

The next day, Wil's spooning out breakfast porridge for Lev and himself when his father calls. Ma takes the call in the study, expecting bad news, but then comes out to put it on speaker because it turns out to be the kind of news everyone should hear.

"We bagged a mountain lion a half hour out in today's hunt," Wil hears his father say. "Pivane is already harvesting his heart."

Intense relief reverberates through the house. Even Lev, who met Grandfather only once, seems overjoyed.

"Wil, go now and tell your grandfather," Ma says. "And be quick about it. For once, good news will travel faster than bad."

Wil grabs his guitar and asks Lev to come along. He even takes Lev in the elevator rather than making him struggle down the ropes.

•

"You're a stubborn man, Grandfather, but you finally got your lion heart!" he says, swinging his guitar around, ready to play some healing tunes even before the transplant.

"Stubbornness is a family trait," the old man says flatly. Wil notices that his grandfather is looking at Lev, not because he's giving Lev his attention but because he's avoiding eye contact with Wil. It makes Wil uneasy.

"What's wrong, Grandfather? I thought you'd be happy."

"I would be, if the heart were mine."

"Excuse me?"

Grandfather twitches a finger at the crowd around the other patient's bed. Wil barely noticed them when he came in, so intent was he on giving Grandfather the news—but apparently the news had already reached him. The woman in the other bed is in her late

twenties or early thirties. The family around her seems very happy in spite of her dire condition.

"The heart is to be hers," Grandfather says. "I've already decided."

Wil stands up so quickly that the chair crashes backward. "What are you saying?"

"I'm a poor risk, Chowilawu. Too old for it to make sense when there's someone younger with a better chance of survival. Her spirit-guide is the lion too."

"It was found by your family," Wil fiercely announces, loud enough for the woman to hear. Good. He wants them to know. "It was found by your family, which means it is meant to be yours and no one else's."

His grandfather's gaze drifts again to Lev, and that makes Wil angry. "Don't look at him. He's not one of us."

"An outsider is objective. His will be the clearest opinion."

Lev takes a step backward, clearly not wanting to be a part of this any more than Wil wants him to be.

"It's your heart" is all Lev says.

Wil is about to relax, relieved to have Lev on his side, until Grandfather says, "You see? The boy agrees with me."

"What?" both Wil and Lev say in unison.

"It's my heart," Grandfather explains. "Which means I have full legal right to decide what happens to it. And I chose to gift it to the young woman over there. I will hear no further discussion."

Fury and grief nearly overwhelm Wil. He storms out of the cardiology lodge—but there is no escaping this. Word of Grandfather's decision reaches the rest of the family quickly. Within the hour, while Wil still stews and storms outside, ignoring Lev's attempts to calm him, his family begins to arrive: his parents, then Uncle Pivane and his family. He sees Grandfather's closest friends arrive. He sees Una. They've all been called to give the old man their good-byes. They've come for the final vigil.

"Do it for him," Ma says gently as she enters the cardiology lodge. "Please, Wil, do it."

He waits outside until everyone has gone in, even Lev. Then he takes the long walk down the hallway toward the round room at the

end. The blue-lipped woman is wheeled past him, followed by her family. She is already prepped for surgery.

Inside the room his family sits on chairs and on the floor. Lev has held a chair for Wil. His grandfather's weary eyes are fixed on him as he takes his spot. He begins to play. At first he plays healing songs, but the tempo is too fast. He's playing them too desperately. No one stops him. Then, in time, the songs evolve into traveling threnodies: tunes meant to ease one's passage from this world to the next.

Over the next few hours Wil melts so completely into the music that his family ignores his presence. He hardly listens as they all say their good-byes, or as his grandfather speaks about the spirit's journey from its failing temple to other realms. He ignores Lev, who appears more out of place than ever with the family. Una crouches next to Lev near the window, listening to Wil play, but he won't look at her. Wil catches a glimpse of his dad's face, etched with sorrow. His father still wears his hunting gear, as does Uncle Pivane, although his uncle is stained with the animal's blood. There is the smell of a bonfire coming from outside the lodge, the giving of thanks, the exuberant singing of the young woman's family.

As the day wears on toward twilight, Tocho almost seems to dissolve before them, giving in to the call from beyond. Then, very near the end, he reaches out to stop Wil from playing, motioning him closer.

He has one last request for Wil, and he whispers it with long spaces between the words. Wil agrees, because he hasn't the strength to argue about tomorrow, because his grandfather has only today.

The promise made, Wil loses himself in the music again, faintly aware of his ma in her hospital whites solemnly taking his grandfather's vitals and shaking her head. Wil plays as his grandfather's breathing slows. Wil plays as his uncle Pivane quietly weeps. Wil plays, the music of his guitar covering everything, until it carries his grandfather's soul to a place Wil cannot see. And when Wil finally lifts his fingers from his instrument, there is nothing but overwhelming silence.

OceanofPDF.com

5 • Lev

In the very center of the rez, miles from its many villages, sprawl the ChanceFolk burial grounds. Many families have adopted the Western use of caskets, more traditional ones bury their dead wrapped in a blanket, and some still invoke the most ancient ritual of all. Although levels of tradition in Wil's family are very mixed, his grandfather was as old-school as they come. His funeral is of the ancient kind.

Tocho is placed on a high platform made of cottonwood and heaped with boughs of juniper. Reed baskets, decorated with lion teeth, are filled with food for the afterlife and hung from poles. A fire is lit, and smoke leaps into the wind. Lev watches carefully, storing the memory.

"Our ancestors believed that the breath of the dead moves to the Lower World," Una explains to him.

Lev is shocked. "Lower World?"

"Not hell," Una says, understanding what he's thinking. "It's the place where spirits dwell. Down or up—neither of those directions has much meaning in the afterlife."

Lev can't help but notice Wil standing apart from everyone else, as if he's suddenly the outsider. "Why isn't Wil taking part in the ceremony?" Lev asks Una.

"Wil followed our traditions because he loved his grandfather. Now he must decide for himself whether to follow the traditions or not. And so must you."

Lev first thinks she's joking. "Me?"

"When your residence petition is approved, you will be an adopted son of the tribe. In addition to protecting you from your unwind order, the adoption will make this your official home. Like everyone else here, you'll eventually choose on which side of the rez wall your spirit belongs."

Lev tries his best to wrap his mind around this. He hasn't thought that far ahead: finding a safe place he can truly call home.

"Wil's grandfather gave you a gift, Lev," Una tells him.

Lev can't begin to imagine what it might be. Anticipation stirs in him.

"He gave the same gift to Wil, but Wil doesn't know it yet. You see, on his deathbed Tocho asked Wil to take you on a vision quest."

Suddenly the wind changes, and their eyes tear from the smoke.

■

There is a communal quest in ten days' time, and Lev is added to the group of boys and girls, to honor Tocho's dying wish. Wil joins them as well, also to honor his grandfather's final request.

The vision quest starts with a sweat lodge. It's total chaos trying to keep almost a dozen ten- and eleven-year-olds occupied while sitting around hot rocks being steamed nearly to death. They drink gallons of salted cactus tea and leave the sweltering heat of the lodge only to pee, which isn't often, since they sweat out almost everything they drink.

Lev, who always felt the youngest of any group he was in, is now the oldest. As if he didn't already feel out of place.

After the sweat lodge, they hike into the mountains. No food on a quest either: just thick, noxious drinks that taste like weeds.

"The sweating and fasting prepare the body for the vision quest," Wil tells him. Pivane is in charge of the quest, with Wil as a reluctant sidekick. "Of course, my uncle and I get real food," he adds, almost taunting. Lev knows Wil is here only because he promised his grandfather.

On the first night, one kid has a vision that he tells the others at breakfast the next day. A pig spirit led him to a courthouse and told him he'd be a judge.

"He's lying," announces Kele, the skinny, hyper kid who often seems to speak for the others. "How much you wanna bet his parents told him to say that?"

Wil begins to call the boy out on it, but Pivane raises his hand and lets it go.

"If the boy has a true vision," Lev overhears Pivane tell Wil, "he will choose it over the lie."

On the next day, there is an archery competition. Luckily for Lev, he took a liking to archery a few years back and placed silver in a citywide competition. Unfortunately, that doesn't help him here. He takes last place.

On the third day, Lev falls and tweaks his wrist again. He has forgotten what clean feels like, and he's covered with mosquito bites. He's miserable and uncomfortable, and his head is pounding.

So why then does he find this to be the happiest week of his life?

Every night they build a fire, and Wil plays his guitar. It is the highlight of the day. So are the stories that Pivane tells: traditional folktales. Some are funny and some are strange. Lev likes to watch the kids around him lean close to the storyteller, their eyes wide with wonder.

On the fourth day, everyone is antsy. Lev isn't sure if it's the effects of not eating or a storm brewing in the mountains to the north. The kids are simmering at breakfast in the muggy stillness. When Ahote spills his weed drink on Lansa, the two boys fight with such fury it takes the combined might of Lev, Wil, and Pivane to separate them.

It doesn't help that Lev feels like he's being watched. He stares into the forest every time a bird erupts from a tree or a twig cracks. He knows it's probably nothing, but all the uneasiness from his time as an AWOL still has him paranoid. His twitchiness spreads to the younger kids, till Pivane finally sends him off for a break.

At first it's a relief to be alone in the small pup tent, but soon the deerskin walls press down on him and the smell of dirty socks drives him outside. He can hear the others washing the breakfast mugs in the clearing. Chin low, he sits cross-legged, ChanceFolk style, in the small thicket of tents, wishing the storm would finally break and get it over with.

"Lev?"

Looking up, he sees Kele fidgeting in front of him. Kele sits down, but he won't look directly at Lev at first. When he finally does, Kele says, "I had my vision last night."

Lev doesn't know what to say. He wonders why Kele came to him rather than Pivane or Wil.

“So you saw your spirit-guide?” Kele seems stuck on what to say next, so Lev prompts him. “It wasn’t a pig, was it?”

“No . . .” Kele draws the word out. “It was a sparrow, like my name.”

Lev is struck by this. Seems right that the spirit-guide would mean something special to a kid, unless of course it’s to be a source of organ replacements.

“So what happened?”

“Something bad.” The boy whispers so quietly that Lev has to lean forward to hear him.

“What was bad?” All the fears that have been haunting him this morning return.

“I don’t know.” Kele looks at him, nervously crushing leaves to powder. “But I saw you leaving. You won’t, will you?”

Lev feels as if an arrow has hit him in the chest, and he can’t breathe. He tries to remember what Wil told him. The hunger and the sweating can cause hallucinations and strange dreams. Or maybe someone suggested to Kele that *mahpees* always leave, and so he dreamed it.

“I’m not leaving,” he says, and he’s reassuring himself just as much as Kele.

“In the vision you were running,” Kele tells him. “People wanted to hurt you . . . and you wanted to hurt them back.”

OceanofPDF.com

6 • Wil

Earlier that morning, Wil told Pivane he was going off to gather firewood, but in reality he just needed to get away. Find a place to think. Now he sits on a cliff-side boulder that gives him a fine view of the forest and a clearer perspective on his life. He can see the camp from here, or at least part of it, and although he does intend to come back with firewood, he doesn't intend to do it for a while.

Wil can no longer deny the resentment building inside of him; it's been building since long before his grandfather's funeral. *Wil, play us a song for healing. Wil, play us a song for calming. Wil, play us a song for celebration, for soothing, for patience, for wisdom.* The tribe has used him like a music machine. No more. He doesn't have an on/off switch. Maybe it's time he played music for a different reason, one of his choosing.

And so when this vision quest is over, and he has fulfilled his promise to his grandfather, even if Lev stays, Wil will not. He resolves that it is time for him to leave the rez and blaze a fresh future for himself, and for Una, too . . . if she decides she loves him more than she loves the rez.

OceanofPDF.com

7 • Lev

Lev tries not to shudder at the prospect of Kele's vision. Lev has dreamed of himself running too. And he's dreamed of revenge. Not against anyone in particular, but everyone at once. The world at large. It's a feeling as dark as the storm clouds on the horizon, and it won't be easy to dispel.

"We're in the rez, surrounded by walls and laws that protect us," he tells Kele with more confidence than he feels. "There's no one to run from here," he adds, more to himself than to Kele.

Then, barely a moment after the words are out of his mouth, something cracks in the woods again—and this time he hears screaming. High-pitched shrieks of surprise. Maybe even terror.

Lev launches himself toward the clearing, with Kele on his heels. The kids are standing, staring at Pivane, who lies facedown in the dirt.

A tranq bullet whistles by Lev's ear and embeds in a log inches away from Kele's foot.

"Get down!" he yells, and pushes Kele to the ground, his arm shielding him. The other kids follow his lead, diving to the ground just as a storm of tranqs flies through the camp. Frantically Lev looks around for Wil, but doesn't see him anywhere.

It's all up to Lev.

He's only a couple of years older, but the rez kids are looking to him for help. He shifts to protect mode, as he once did for CyFi.

While scanning the surrounding trees, frantic thoughts jostle for attention: *They've found me. They're taking me to harvest camp. I'll be tithed after all.* And although he's scared, his anger overwhelms the fear. This is supposed to be a sanctuary. ChanceFolk are supposed to be protected. But are *mahpees*? Maybe someone on the rez turned him in before his petition to the Council could be signed.

Kele shifts impatiently under his arm. "Why don't we shoot back?"

But Lev has no idea where Pivane's tranq rifle is—and even if he had it, he has no idea where to shoot.

"Stay here," he orders Kele and the others. "Don't move till I tell you." Then, like a soldier, Lev uses his toes and elbows to crawl low across the clearing. One of the kids has a tranq flag in his leg and is unconscious. Another got hit in the back. The rest are okay. Where the hell is Wil?

His ear pressed to the ground, Lev feels the tramp of feet, and into the clearing stride three men in dirty battle fatigues, mismatched as if they found their clothes in a thrift store. The three are barely men. They seem no older than nineteen or twenty. They are not ChanceFolk —they're outsiders.

One of the kids—the youngest girl in the group—gets up to run.

"Pakwa, no!" Lev yells.

Too late. The lead pirate, with a quick flick of his wrist, fires his pistol, tranqing her in the back of the neck, and she goes down, unconscious.

"Well, well, well," the leader says. He's tough, missing an ear, and he handles his gun like he was born with it. *Van Gogh,* thinks Lev. *Cut his ear off for the woman he loved.* But Lev imagines that this guy's ear was cut off by someone else. Probably in a fight. The second guy is squinty-eyed, like either he's got bad eyesight or he's so used to glaring at people that his eyes stayed that way. The third guy has big teeth and a straggly beard, that taken together, make him look like a goat. "What a lovely nest of SlotMongers we've found," says Van Gogh.

Lev, his mouth dry, gets up to face the attackers, putting himself between them and the kids on the ground.

"This kid's sienna!" says the goat, stating the obvious.

Van Gogh is amused. "One wonders what a nice sienna boy is doing running with SlotMongers." The guy sounds like he was raised in high-class boarding schools, but he looks as ragged and hungry as the others.

"Exchange program," Lev says. "I hope you know that violence against People of Chance on their own rez is punishable by death." Lev doesn't know if this is true, but if it's not, it should be. "Leave now and we'll forget this ever happened."

"Shut it!" says Squints, taking aim at Lev with his tranq pistol.

“These ’Mongers are all underage,” says the goat.

“Which means their parts are worth even more on the black market.” Van Gogh reaches down and tousles Kele’s hair. “Isn’t that right, lambchop?”

Kele pulls away and smacks his hand. Squints raises his gun to tranq him, but Van Gogh doesn’t let him.

“We’ve wasted enough ammo. Save it until we need it.”

Lev tries to swallow his fear. If there was any doubt as to what these lowlifes were, it’s gone. They are hunters of human flesh. Parts pirates.

“Take me,” Lev says, hardly believing he’s saying it. “I’m the one you want. I’m a tithe, which means I’m worth more on the black market than other AWOLs.”

Van Gogh grins. “But not nearly as much as the right little SlotMonger.”

Suddenly there’s the *pfft* of a tranq shot, and Squints’s eyes go uncharacteristically wide before he falls to the ground, with the flag of a tranq in his back. A tranq fired by a custom-made zebrawood rifle.

OceanofPDF.com

8 • Wil

At the first sound of a rifle crack, Wil's attention snapped to the clearing. He saw Pivane fall to the ground, and Wil was instantly on his feet, running back to camp. His heart hammering, he circled the camp quietly, slipping into Pivane's tent to grab his rifle. Then, having found an unseen position from which to fire, he shot the tallest one, who dropped like a bag of bones.

Now, still wielding his uncle's rifle, Wil emerges into the clearing, his aim trained on the leader, but the leader is quick. He pulls out an old-fashioned revolver—the kind that takes only real bullets—and shoves it against Lev's temple.

"Drop it or I kill him."

They freeze in a standoff.

"Thirty-eight caliber, my friend," the gunman says. "You can tranq me, but your friend will be dead before I hit the ground. Drop the rifle now!"

Wil lowers it but doesn't drop it. He's not that stupid. The leader considers the action, then takes the pistol away from Lev's head, shoving him to the ground.

"What do you want?" Wil asks.

The leader signals his remaining conspirator—the goat-ugly one with the scraggly beard. He pulls something from his pocket and gives it to Wil. "We found this posted in Denver last week."

It's a flier on bright red paper that reads: SEEKING PEOPLE OF CHANCE PARTS. TRIPLE RECOMPENSE FOR SPECIAL GIFTS.

Light suddenly dawns. Parts pirates? These intruders are parts pirates?

"People of Chance are protected," Wil says. "We can't be unwound."

"Hardly the point, Hiawatha," the leader says, smoothing his oily hair over an ear that doesn't exist. "This requisition isn't strictly legal, which makes it very profitable."

“So let’s cut to the chase,” says the other parts pirate. “Any of these here kids got special skills?”

A moment of silence, then Lansa says, “Nova can do high math. Algebra and stuff.”

“Oh, yeah, Lansa?” says Nova. “Why don’t you tell them how good you are with a bow and arrow?”

“Both of you shut up!” yells Lev. “Don’t turn on each other. That’s what these dirtbags want!”

The goat-faced one glares at Lev, then kicks Lev in the side.

Wil advances on him, but One-Ear raises his pistol at Wil. “Let’s all take a deep breath, shall we?”

Lev lies in the dirt, the grimace fading from his face. He makes eye contact with Wil to let him know that he’s okay. Hurt, but okay. Wil has never felt so powerless. He thinks of his grandfather. What would he have done?

“Such lovely choices,” the leader says, looking at the batch of kids. “Perhaps we’ll take the lot.”

“Do that,” says Wil, “and our entire tribe will hunt you for the rest of your miserable lives, and I promise you those lives won’t be long. . . . But that won’t happen if one of us goes of our own free will.”

“That’s not yer choice to make!” says Goat-Face. “We choose!”

“Then choose wisely!” Wil says. Near his uncle he sees his guitar where he left it at breakfast, propped against a log. Everything seems to go quiet, though dimly he’s aware of the two pirates talking to each other. Plotting. Choosing.

Wil knows how he can protect the children. He knows how he can save Pivane and Lev.

He lays his uncle’s rifle on the ground and walks to his guitar.

“Hey,” Goat-Face yells at him, and scoops up Pivane’s rifle. “Where do you think yer going!” Wil picks up his guitar and sits on the log. He knows it’s the only weapon he needs.

He thinks of Una, and the last thing she said to him. She had carved him a pick of rare canyon sinker wood—trees lying submerged for months in the Colorado River—and she gave it to him when he left

for this vision quest. Now he pulls it from between the strings and turns it over in his fingers, thinking of her words:

"I will not miss you, Guitar Boy," she said, clearly meaning that she would, but refusing to say it out loud.

He kisses the pick and puts it in his pocket. He will not waste it on the likes of these monsters. He will play with his bare fingers. He will play a song of their greed. Of their malice. Of their corruption. He will entice them until they are so consumed by their own lust for money that they will see him as their shining meal ticket and forget the others.

"Tell me what this is worth," Wil says, and begins to play.

The music soars through the camp. He starts with a complicated baroque piece, then switches to a fiery ChanceFolk traditional and finishes with the Spanish music he loves best, but all angry. Accusing. Music that is both glorious and stirring, yet at the same time a secret indictment of the men he is playing for. Each piece makes his fingers tingle and electrifies even the trees surrounding them.

As always, his audience waits in a charged silence long after the last note is played. Even the leader's gun is pointed at the ground, as if he's forgotten he's holding it. Then something happens. Something different.

Someone claps.

He looks at Lev, still sitting in the dirt, gun oil smudged on his neck, mud on his cheek. Lev's eyes are fixed only on Wil. He claps with all his might, bringing his hands together powerfully, shattering the silence with his singular applause. Then Kele joins in, then Nova, then all the kids who are still conscious. It becomes rhythmic, as the applause falls into unison.

"Stop clapping!" the goat-faced pirate screams. His face pale, he points a shaking tranq rifle at Lev. "Stop it! You're freaking me out."

The other one laughs. "You'll have to excuse my associate. You see, his brother died in a clapper attack."

Looks like they blew up the wrong one, Wil wants to say, but he realizes that the quickening pace and rising volume of their clapping says it much better than words.

Finally the chorus of applause falls off, with Lev's loud clapping the last to cease, leaving his hands red from the passion of it.

The lead parts pirate holds eye contact with Wil and nods, sealing Wil's fate. "You've got yourself a deal." Then he orders his comrade to tie the others up.

"What about Bobby?" Goat-Face asks, pointing to their tranq'd accomplice.

The leader spares a single look at the unconscious pirate, aims his revolver, and puts a bullet in his head. "Problem solved."

Then the two of them duct-tape the kids' hands and feet and tie all six together, weaving a rope through their trussed limbs. Kele almost spits at them till he catches Wil's warning look.

Goat-Face ties Lev alone to the tree near where Pivane lies, leaving Lev struggling against the tight ropes.

"Let me say my good-byes," Wil asks the leader.

The man sits on the log where Wil played his guitar, waving his tranq pistol as a warning. Apparently Wil is now too valuable to shoot with real bullets. "Make it quick."

As Goat-Face finishes securing Lev to the tree, Wil approaches Lev. Goat-Face takes a step back, watching Wil warily as if he expects to be attacked.

"Wil, what are you doing?" Lev whispers. "These guys are for real. You don't come back from a chop shop."

"My choice, Lev. It's your job now to take care of these kids. Calm them. Reassure them. Pivane will wake up in a few hours. You'll all be fine."

Lev swallows and nods, accepting the responsibility.

Wil summons a wry smile for Lev before the parts pirates take him and his guitar away. "Thanks for the applause, little brother."

OceanofPDF.com

9 • Lev

In the village three hours later, Lev leans against Pivane's dusty truck, only half listening as Pivane tells the sheriff what happened. He watches the kids rushed to their cars and taken home. Only Kele looks back and waves good-bye to Lev.

The sheriff returns to his car to relay the report and then heads back up the mountain to retrieve Bobby, the dead parts pirate—probably wishing it was one of them who took him out, and not one of his own gang.

Lev can't help but notice the cold glare that the policemen throw at him before they leave.

•

"Your petition to join the tribe has been denied," Wil's ma tells him, the pain in her voice partly for him and partly for her son who will never return. "I'm sorry, Lev."

Lev accepts the news with a stoic nod. He knew this would be the decision. He knew because of the looks everyone has given him since he returned from the vision quest. Those who know him see him as a walking gravestone with Wil's name etched on his sienna face. Those who don't know him see only a harbinger of the world that so cruelly took Chowilawu away. Wil's music—his spirit —cannot be replaced by any musician on the rez. The wound will be raw for a very long time. And there's no one they can blame for it. No one but Lev. Even if they allow him to stay, Lev knows the rez can no longer be his sanctuary.

Pivane volunteers to drive him to the reservation's northern entrance: immense bronze gates bookended by towers of green glass. Lev leans forward to see the bells in the towers and the rearing, life-size bronze mustang suspended above the gate. Wil told him that fine, nearly invisible wires and a clear glass bridge support the mustang. When Chinook winds blow through the valley, children gather, hoping to see the horse escape its fetters and fly away.

“Where will I go?” Lev asks simply.

“That is for you to decide.” Pivane leans across him and retrieves his wallet from the glove compartment. Then he hands Lev a huge wad of cash.

“Too much,” Lev manages, but Pivane shakes his head.

“By accepting this gift, you will honor me . . . and you will honor him,” Pivane says. “The children told me how you offered yourself to the pirates before Wil did. It was not your fault they chose him over you.”

Lev obediently shoves the money into his pocket. He shakes Pivane’s hand as he gets out of the car.

“I hope your spirit-guide takes you to a place of safety. A place you can call home,” Pivane says.

Lev closes the door, and in a plume of dust the truck disappears down the street. Only then does it occur to Lev that he has no spirit-guide. He never completed his vision quest. There is nothing and no one to guide him through this dim, foggy future.

A security guard nods as he exits the pedestrian gate, and Lev heads for a bus stop a hundred feet away. He sees nothing else but a barren plateau, spotted with sage, which stretches to the horizon, not quite as barren as he feels inside.

He counts the money Pivane has given him, and it will carry him far indeed, but not far enough, because there is nowhere far enough away from all the things he’s experienced since the day he was sent off to be tithed.

Wil healed him with music, taught him the way of his people, and saved him from the pirates by sacrificing his own life.

All he was able to give Wil was applause.

The bus schedule shows the next departure is in thirty minutes. He doesn’t bother checking the destination. Lev knows that wherever it leads, his path ahead is dark. He has nothing left to lose. A burning fills his emptiness. Revenge drives him now.

As he looks at his hands, he begins to see a purpose for his applause. It’s a powerful purpose that will make his anger known . . . and tear the world to shreds.

OceanofPDF.com

10 • Wil

Like a crow Wil has flown over the rez wall, but not as he imagined. Deep down, he still expects the Tribal Council—or maybe even the Alliance of Tribal Nations—to somehow rescue him. But no one comes.

The pirates drive him not to a chop shop but to a private hospital. In this upscale, designer clinic of glass walls, soft lights, and wall-size murals of cascading color, he sees no patients. He is treated like a rock star by an extensive staff, and is provided any food he'd like, but he's not hungry. He's offered any music, the latest movies, games, books, or television, but nothing distracts him. He only watches the door.

On his third day, a neurologist, a surgeon, and a severe-looking blond woman come in and graciously ask him to play his guitar. Despite heartache, Wil plays flawlessly, and they are duly impressed. He still expects that somehow his playing will open their hearts and set him free. He still expects someone from the tribe to come to his door with good news. But no one comes.

On the fourth day, at dawn, he's put in restraints. A nurse gives him a shot, and he feels woozy. They roll him into an operating room: bright lights, white walls, monitors bleeping, sterile, cold. Nothing like the surgical lodge at home.

He feels numb despair. He is being unwound. And he comes to his end alone.

Then he sees a face in the operating room he recognizes. Although her hair is hidden by surgical scrubs, she doesn't wear a mask like the others. It's as if his seeing her face is more important that the sterile environment. He's not surprised to see her again. He played his guitar for this woman. She never told him her name, although he heard the others call her Roberta.

"Do you remember me, Chowilawu?" she asks, with the hint of a British accent almost Americanized. "We met yesterday." She

pronounces his name flawlessly. It pleases him, yet troubles him at the same time.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks. "Why me?"

"We have been searching for the right Person of Chance for a very long time. You will be part of a spectacular experiment. One that will change the future."

"Will you tell my parents what happened to me? Please?"

"I'm sorry, Wil. No one can know."

This shakes him worse than death. His parents, Pivane, Una, the whole tribe grieving his absence, never knowing his fate.

She takes his hand in hers. "I want you to know that your talent will not be lost. These hands and the neuron bundles that hold every bit of your musical memory will be kept together. Intact. Because I, too, treasure that which means the most to you."

It's not anything close to what Wil truly wants, but he tries to cling to the knowledge that his gift of music will somehow survive his unwinding.

"My guitar," he manages through chattering teeth, ignoring the fact that he can no longer feel his toes.

"It's safe," Roberta says quickly. "I have it."

"Send it home."

She hesitates, and then nods.

Wil's unwinding proceeds at an alarming rate. All too soon a wave of darkness crashes over him. He can no longer hear Roberta. He can no longer see her.

Then, in the void, he senses someone lean close to him. Someone familiar.

"Grandfather?" he hazards to say. He cannot hear himself speak.

"Yes, Chowilawu."

"Are we are going to the Lower World?"

"We will see, Chowilawu," his grandfather says. "We will see."

But whatever happens now, it doesn't matter to Wil. Because someone finally came.

OceanofPDF.com

11 • Una

Not through smoke signals.

Not through the intricate legal investigations of the Council.

Not through the tribal nations' security task force, put in place after the parts pirates took him.

In the end, the rez finds out Wil is no more when his guitar is delivered with no note and no return address.

Una cradles the guitar in her arms and remembers: Wil building mountains for her in a sandbox when they were five. The quiet delight in his eyes when she asked him to marry her, when they were six. His grief as Tocho died, while she and Lev sat watching on the hospital floor. The touch of Wil's hand on her arm when he said good-bye.

In every memory is his music, and she hears it again every day, playing in the wind through the trees to tease and torment her. Or maybe to comfort her and remind her that nothing and no one is ever truly lost.

Una tries to hold on to that as she lays Wil's guitar on the workshop table. There is no body; there is only the guitar. So she gently, lovingly, unstrings it and prepares it for the funeral pyre in the morning.

And she tells no one of the strange hope she cradles in her heart, that somehow she will hear Wil's music again, loud and pure, calling forth her soul.

THE END

OceanofPDF.com

NEAL SHUSTERMAN is the author of many novels for young adults, including *Unwind*, which was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and a Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Readers and has won more than thirty other awards; the highly acclaimed Skinjacker Trilogy (*Everlost*, *Everwild*, and *Everfound*), and *Full Tilt*, which has received twenty awards and honors. He also writes screenplays for motion pictures and television shows, including *Goosebumps* and the Disney Channel original movie *Pixel Perfect*. Currently he is adapting *Unwind* as a feature film. The father of four children, Neal lives in Southern California. Visit him at StoryMan.com

MICHELLE KNOWLDEN has published fourteen stories with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, most featuring hypochondriac detective Micky Cardex. The story "No, Thank You, John" was nominated for a Shamus Award. Many of Ms. Knowlden's stories have been included in anthologies and translated in multiple languages, including "Where Old Kings Gather" for Tor Books' *More Amazing Stories* anthology. This is Michelle Knowlden's second collaboration with Neal Shusterman. The first was the X-Files young adult novel *Dark Matter* for HarperCollins in 1999, under the name Easton Royce.

OceanofPDF.com

Did you love this book?

Want to get access to the hottest books for free?

Log on to simonandschuster.com/pulseit

to find out how to join,

get access to cool sweepstakes,

and hear about your favorite authors!

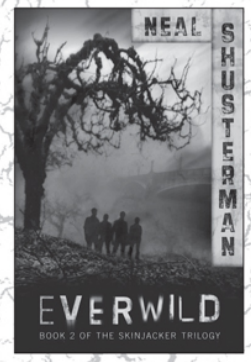
Become part of Pulse IT and tell us what you think!

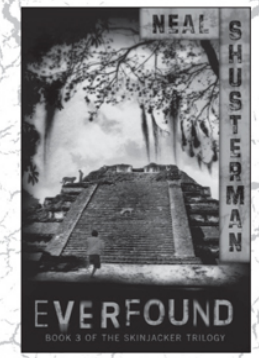
Margaret K. McElderry Books

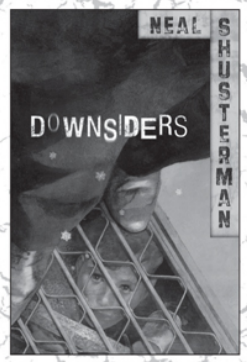
SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

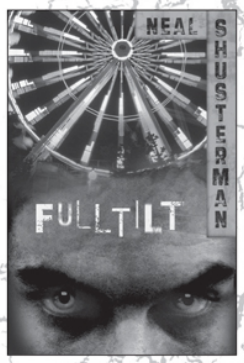
SIMON PULSE

LOOKING FOR A THRILLING READ?









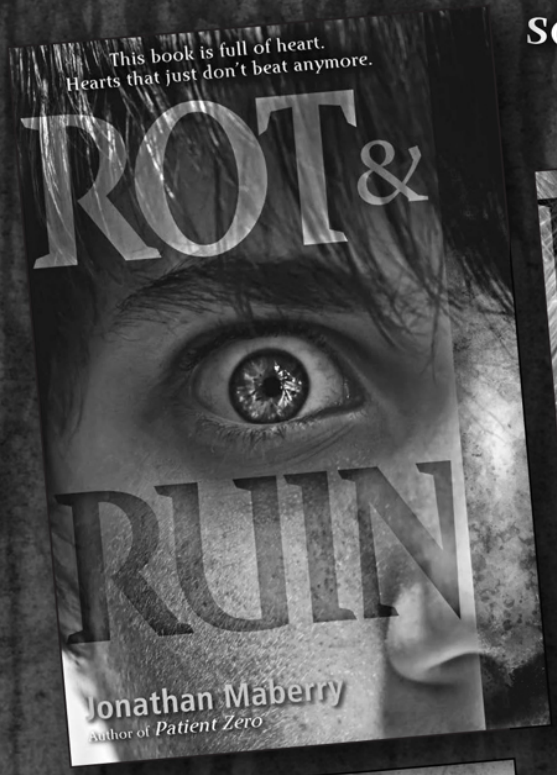
Check out these books by *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award winner

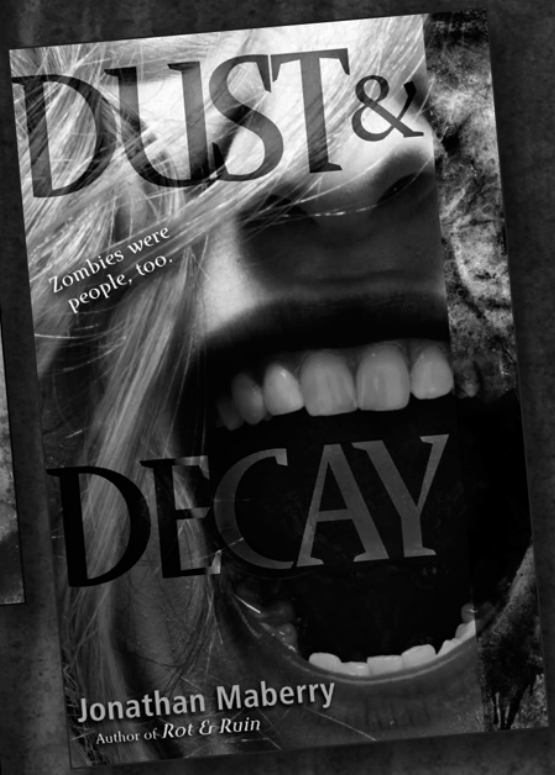
NEAL SHUSTERMAN

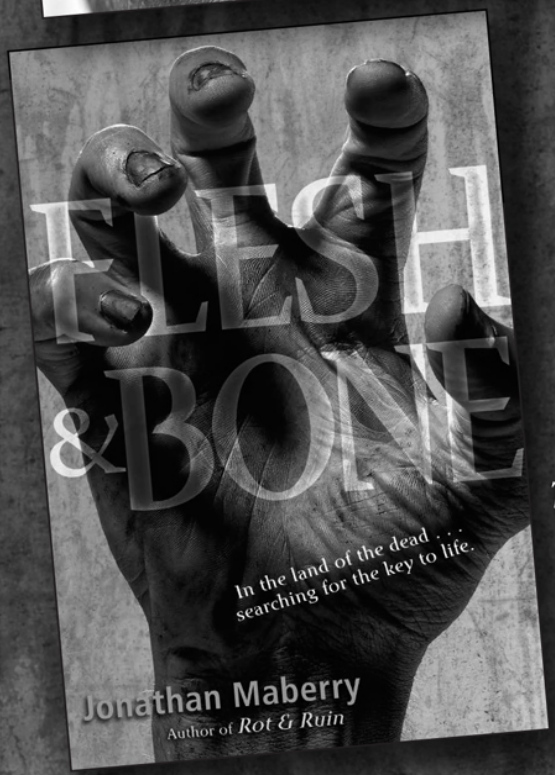
SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

TEEN.SimonandSchuster.com

Benny Imura couldn't hold a job,
so he took to killing.







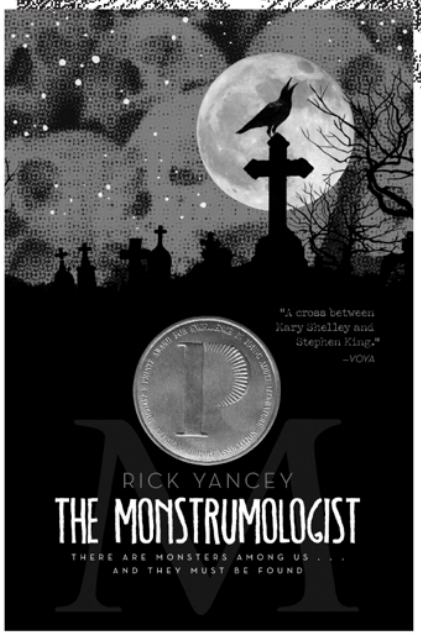
EBOOK EDITIONS ALSO AVAILABLE

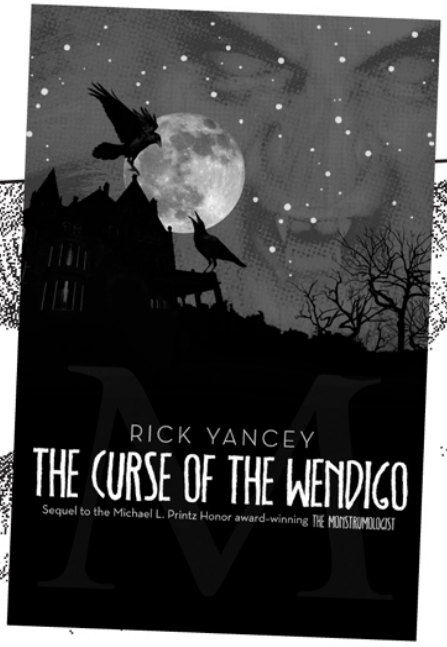
SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

TEEN.SimonandSchuster.com

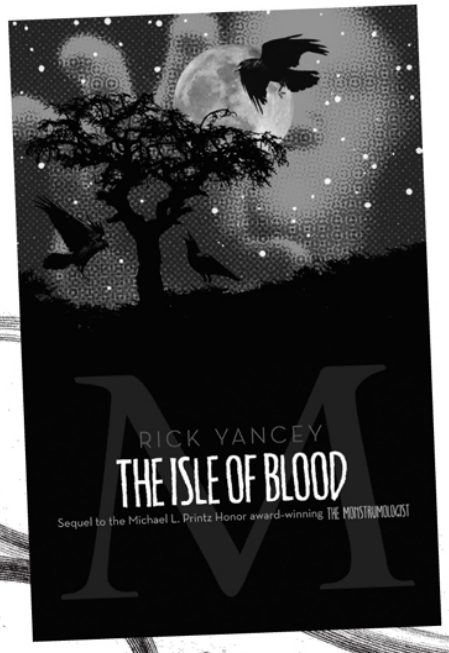
THE MONSTRUMOLOGIST

RICK YANCEY


"A cross between Mary Shelley and Stephen King."
–VOYA
RICK YANCEY
THE MONSTRUMOLOGIST
THERE ARE MONSTERS AMONG US . . .
AND THEY MUST BE FOUND



A monster-hunting
doctor . . .
a plague of headless
monsters with
razor-sharp teeth in
their torsos . . .
and a race to save humanity
before it's too late.

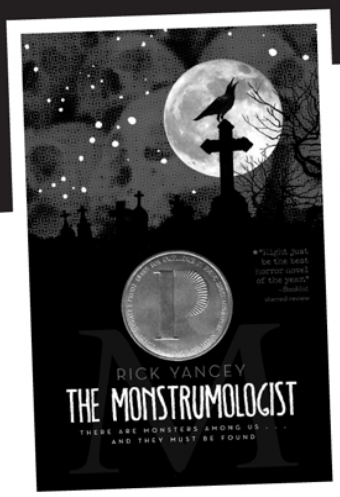


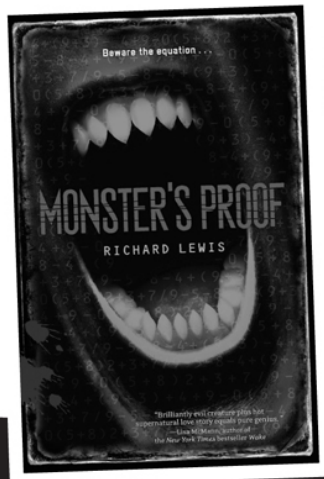
CONTINUE THE JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS
WITH THE CONCLUSION OF THE
MONSTRUMOLOGIST SERIES:
THE FINAL DESCENT.

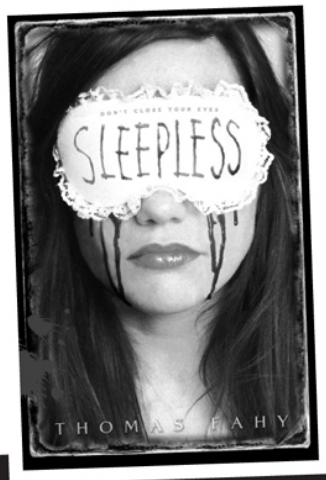
EBOOK EDITIONS ALSO AVAILABLE

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR · TEEN.SimonandSchuster.com

GRAB THESE BOOKS . . .



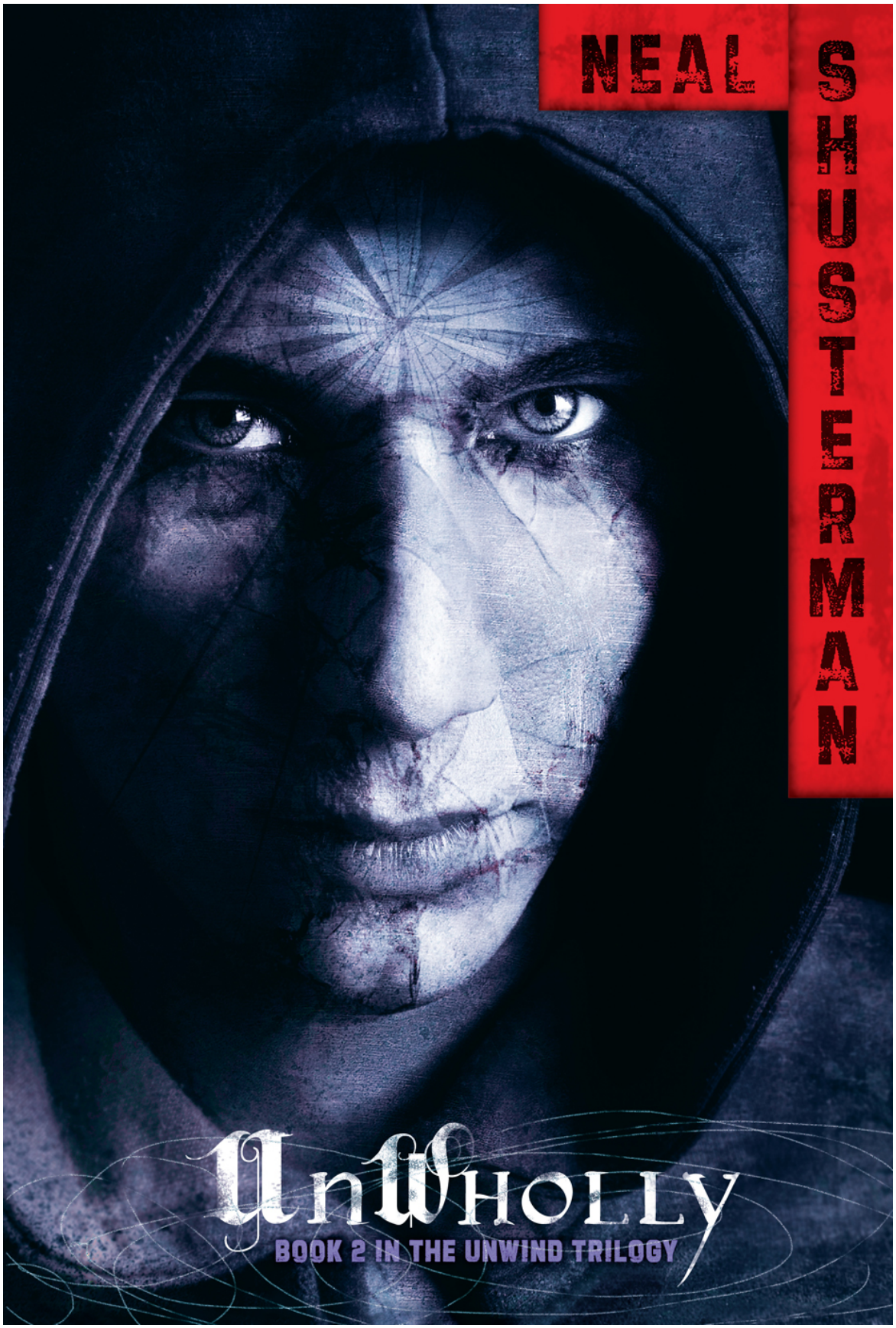




BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

EBOOK EDITIONS ALSO AVAILABLE SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR TEEN.SIMONANDSCHUSTER.COM

OceanofPDF.com


NEAL
SHUSTERMAN
UnWholly
BOOK 2 IN THE UNWIND TRILOGY

Neal Shusterman

UnWholly

BOOK 2 OF THE UNWIND TRILOGY

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

OceanofPDF.com

For Charlotte Ruth Shusterman
Love you, Mom

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never dreamed that *Unwind* would turn into a trilogy, but I just couldn't escape the strange world it encompasses. I owe a continuing debt of gratitude to David Gale, Navah Wolfe, Justin Chanda, Anne Zafian, and everyone in Simon & Schuster's editorial department. Also Paul Crichton and Lydia Finn for organizing publicity and book tours, Michelle Fadlalla and Venessa Williams for their work on school and library conferences, Katrina Groover in managing editorial, Chava Wolin in production, and Chloë Foglia in design.

I thank my children for their endless patience while Dad disappears deep into his head, and Marcia Blanco, my extraordinary assistant, who keeps me sane and somehow keeps me organized! Many thanks to Wendy Doyle and Heidi Stoll for their tireless work on the Shustermania newsletter. Another nod to Wendy, and to my son Jarrod, for transcribing my story ramblings whenever I find myself in a digital dictatorial phase. Thanks to my critique group, the Fictionaires, for helping to guide my words—particularly Michelle Knowlden, for our wonderful collaboration on the "UnStrung" short story, and my "Big Sis" Patricia, for catching me when I McFall.

I am indebted to the countless educators out there who are finding ways of using my books in the classroom, and the many fans who tell me how my books affect their lives—fans like Veronica Knysh, whose e-mail brought me to tears and made me remember the reason why I write.

Thanks to Andrea Brown, Trevor Engelson, Shep Rosenman, Lee Rosenbaum, Steve Fisher, and Debbie Deuble-Hill: my proverbial "people," who run my career with a collectively enlightened hand (and keep me from running it into the ground!). My gratitude also goes out to Marc Benardout, Catherine Kimmel, Julian Stone, and Charlotte Stout, whose unflinching belief in *Unwind* and *UnWholly* will most certainly result in an incredible film!

And finally I thank my parents, Milton and Charlotte Shusterman, for always being there, even when they can't be.

OceanofPDF.com

And the answer is . . .

As Unwind *and* UnWholly *represent a world turned upside down, what better way to keep you up to speed than giving the answer before the question, like on a certain quiz show? Read the answers, and see how many questions you can get right! Get enough right and you may get to tear up your own unwind order! (Warning: Skipping the game may leave you feeling a bit unwound while reading. . . .)*

This is the process by which an individual is dismantled. By law, 99.44 percent of a person must be used and kept alive in transplant.

What is unwinding?

America's second civil war—also known as the Heartland War—ended when the pro-life and pro-choice armies came to this agreement, which made life inviolable from conception to the age of thirteen but allowed for the "retroactive abortion" of troubled teenagers.

What is the Unwind Accord?

When a mother does not wish to keep a newborn baby, she has the legal option to leave the baby on someone else's doorstep. The baby then becomes the legal responsibility of the people in that home. This is the common term for the leaving of the baby.

What is storking?

When a person is unwound, since virtually all of them is still alive, they are not considered to be dead, but to be living in this state.

What is the divided state?

These are licensed facilities in which Unwinds are prepared for a divided state. While each facility has its own particular personality, they are all designed to provide a positive experience for youth designated for unwinding.

What are harvest camps?

This northern Arizona harvest camp, in a town named after the joyful lumberjacks who founded it, has recently been closed due to terrorist activity.

What is Happy Jack Harvest Camp?

This is a slang term for the clinic within a harvest camp where unwinding is performed.

What is a Chop Shop?

These young terrorists have introduced an undetectable chemical into their circulatory system that makes their blood explosive. They get their name because they detonate by bringing their hands together in powerful applause.

What are clappers?

This is the common term for the law enforcement officers who work for the National Juvenile Authority and are responsible for the policing of Unwinds.

What are Juvey-cops, or Juvies?

The act of chemically rendering someone unconscious by use of tranquilizer bullets or darts. It is the preferred method utilized by juvenile enforcement officers, because using bullets on Unwinds is both illegal and damages their vital organs, thereby reducing their value.

What is tranq'ing?

From the French word for "beef"—and probably the origin of the slang expression "buff"—this is the common term for a soldier, or a muscular teen on track for a military career.

What is a boeuf?

Originally a military term, it means "away without leave" but has more recently been used as a term for runaway Unwinds.

What is AWOL?

This organization fights unwinding by rescuing AWOL Unwinds. However, it's not as well organized as people think.

What is the ADR or Anti-Divisional Resistance?

This secret (not so secret) sanctuary for AWOL Unwinds is at a massive airplane salvage yard in the Arizona desert.

What is the Graveyard?

Also known as Connor Lassiter, this runaway Unwind from Ohio is believed to be responsible for the revolt at Happy Jack Harvest Camp, and is presumed dead.

Who is the Akron AWOL?

Derived from the term meaning "ten percent," this is a child designated from birth for unwinding, usually for religious reasons.

What is a tithe?

This tithe became a clapper who didn't clap, and by doing so, put a face on the resistance movement.

Who is Lev Calder?

This is the last name given to parentless children raised in state homes.

What is Ward?

A survivor of Happy Jack Harvest Camp, this former state ward became a paraplegic, because she refused to have her damaged spine replaced by the spine of an Unwind.

Who is Risa Ward?

Wishing you a nail-biting, sleep-depriving, thought-provoking read!

Neal Shusterman

OceanofPDF.com

Part One

Violations

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.

—*Albert Camus*

OceanofPDF.com

1 · Starkey

He's fighting a nightmare when they come for him.

A great flood is swallowing the world, and in the middle of it all, he's being mauled by a bear. He's more annoyed than terrified. As if the flood isn't enough, his deep, dark mind has to send an angry grizzly to tear into him.

Then he's dragged feetfirst out of the jaws of death and drowning Armageddon.

"Up! Now! Let's go!"

He opens his eyes to a brightly lit bedroom that ought to be dark. Two Juvey-cops manhandle him, grabbing his arms, preventing him from fighting back long before he's awake enough to try.

"No! Stop! What is this?"

Handcuffs. First his right wrist, then his left.

"On your feet!"

They yank him to his feet as if he's resisting—which he would, if he were more awake.

"Leave me alone! What's going on?"

But in an instant he's awake enough to know exactly what's going on. It's a kidnapping. But you can't call it kidnapping when transfer papers have been signed in triplicate.

"Verbally confirm that you are Mason Michael Starkey."

There are two officers. One is short and muscular, the other tall and muscular. Probably military boeufs before they took jobs as Juvey-rounders. It takes a special heartless breed to be a Juvey-cop, but to specialize as a rounder you probably need to be soulless as well. The fact that he's being rounded for unwinding shocks and terrifies Starkey, but he refuses to show it, because he knows Juvey-rounders get off on other people's fear.

The short one, who is clearly the mouthpiece of this duo, gets in his face and repeats, "Verbally confirm that you are Mason Michael Starkey!"

"And why should I do that?"

"Kid," says the other rounder, "this can go down easy or hard, but either way it's going down." The second cop is more soft spoken with a pair of lips that clearly aren't his. In fact, they look like they came from a girl. "The drill's not so hard, so just get with the program."

He talks as if Starkey should have known they were coming, but what Unwind ever really knows? Every Unwind believes in their heart of hearts that it won't happen to them—that their parents, no matter how strained things get, will be smart enough not to fall for the net ads, TV commercials, and billboards that say things like "Unwinding: the sensible solution." But who is he kidding? Even without the constant media blitz, Starkey's been a potential candidate for unwinding since the moment he arrived on the doorstep. Perhaps he should be surprised that his parents waited so long.

Now the mouthpiece gets deep in his personal space. "For the last time, verbally confirm that you are—"

"Yeah, yeah, Mason Michael Starkey. Now get out of my face, your breath stinks."

With his identity verbally confirmed, Lady-Lips pulls out a form in triplicate: white, yellow, and pink.

"So is this how you do it?" Starkey asks, his voice beginning to quaver. "You arrest me? What's my crime? Being sixteen? Or maybe it's just being here at all."

"Quiet-or-we-tranq-you," says Mouthpiece, like it's all one word.

A part of Starkey wants to be tranq'd—just go to sleep and if he's lucky, never wake up. That way he won't have to face the utter humiliation of being torn from his life in the middle of the night. But no, he wants to see his parents' faces. Or, more to the point, he wants *them* to see *his* face, and if he's tranq'd, they get off easy. They won't have to look him in the eye.

Lady-Lips holds the unwind order in front of him and begins to read the infamous Paragraph Nine, the "Negation Clause."

"Mason Michael Starkey, by the signing of this order, your parents and/or legal guardians have retroactively terminated your tenure, backdated to six days postconception, leaving you in violation of Existential Code 390. In light of this, you are hereby remanded to the

California Juvenile Authority for summary division, also known as unwinding."

"Blah, blah, blah."

"Any rights previously granted to you by the county, state, or federal government as a citizen thereof are now officially and permanently revoked." He folds the unwind order and shoves it into his pocket.

"Congratulations, Mr. Starkey," says Mouthpiece. "You no longer exist."

"Then why are you talking to me?"

"We won't be for much longer." They tug him toward the door.

"Can I at least put on shoes?"

They let him go but stay on their guard.

Starkey takes his sweet time tying his shoes. Then they pull him out of his room and down the stairs. The Juvey-cops have heavy boots that intimidate the wood of the steps. The three of them sound like a herd of cattle as they go down.

His parents wait in the foyer. It's three in the morning, but they're still fully dressed. They've been awake all night anticipating this. Starkey sees anguish on their faces, or maybe it's relief, it's hard to tell. He hardens his own emotions, hiding them behind a mock smile.

"Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" he says brightly. "Guess what just happened to me? I'll give you twenty guesses to figure it out!"

His father takes a deep breath, preparing to launch into the Great Unwinding Speech that every parent prepares for a wayward child. Even if they never use it, they still prepare it, running the words through their minds while on lunch break, or while sitting in traffic, or while listening to some moronic boss blather on about price points and distribution, and whatever other crap that people in office buildings have meetings about.

What were the statistics? Starkey saw it on the news once. Every year the thought of unwinding passes through the mind of one in ten parents. Of those, one in ten seriously considers it, and of those, one in twenty actually goes through with it—and the statistic doubles with every additional kid a family has. Crunch those juicy numbers, and one out of every two thousand kids between the ages of thirteen and

seventeen will be unwound each year. Better odds than the lottery—and that doesn't even include the kids in state homes.

His father, keeping his distance, begins the speech. "Mason, can't you see that you left us no choice?"

The Juvey-cops hold him firm at the bottom of the stairs, but they make no move to get him outside. They know they must allow the parental rite of passage; the verbal boot out the door.

"The fights, the drugs, the stolen car—and now being expelled from yet another school. What's next, Mason?"

"Gee, I don't know, Dad. There are so many bad choices I can make."

"Not anymore. We care enough about you to end your bad choices before they end you."

That just makes him laugh out loud.

And then there's a voice from the top of the stairs.

"No! You can't do this!"

His sister, Jenna—his parents' biological daughter—stands at the top of the stairs in teddy bear pajamas that seem too old for her thirteen years.

"Go back to bed, Jenna," their mother says.

"You're unwinding him just because he was storked, and that's unfair! And right before Christmas, too! What if I had come storked? Would you unwind me also?"

"We are not having this discussion!" yells their father, as their mother begins to cry. "Go back to bed!"

But she doesn't. She folds her arms and sits at the top of the stairs in defiance, witnessing the whole thing. Good for her.

His mother's tears are genuine, but he's unsure whether she's crying for him or for the rest of the family. "All these things you do, everyone told us they were a cry for help," she says. "So why didn't you let us help you?"

He wants to scream. How could he possibly explain it to them if they can't see? They don't know what it's like to go through sixteen years of life knowing you weren't wanted; a mystery baby of uncertain race storked on the doorstep of a couple so sienna-pale, they could have been vampires. Or to still remember that day when you were

three years old and your mom, all doped up on pain medication from your sister's cesarean delivery, took you to a fire station and begged them to take you away and make you a ward of the state. Or how about knowing every Christmas morning that your gift is not a joy, but an obligation? And that your birthday isn't even real because they can't pinpoint when you were born, just the day you were left on a welcome mat that some new mother took too literally?

And what about the taunts from the other kids at school?

In fourth grade Mason's parents were called into the principal's office. He had flipped a boy off the top platform of the jungle gym. The kid had suffered a concussion and a broken arm.

"Why, Mason?" his parents had asked, right there in front of the principal. "Why did you do it?"

He told them that the other kids were calling him "Storky" instead of Starkey, and that this was the boy who had started it. He naively thought they'd rise to his defense, but they just dismissed it as if it didn't matter.

"You could have killed that boy," his father had reprimanded. "And why? Because of words? Words don't hurt you." Which is one of the hugest criminal lies perpetrated by adults against children in this world. Because words hurt more than any physical pain. He would have gladly taken a concussion and a broken arm if he never had to be singled out as a storked child ever again.

In the end, he got sent to a different school and was ordered to have mandatory counseling.

"You think about what you did," his old principal had told him.

And he did what he was told, like a good little boy. He gave it plenty of thought and decided he should have found a higher platform.

So how do you even begin to explain that? How do you explain a lifetime of injustice in the time it takes the Juvey-cops to herd you out the door? The answer is easy: You don't even try.

"I'm sorry, Mason," his father says, tears in his eyes as well. "But it's better for everyone this way. Including you."

Starkey knows he'll never make his parents understand, but if nothing else, he'll have the last word.

"Hey, Mom, by the way . . . Dad's late nights at the office aren't really at the office. They're with your friend Nancy."

But before he can begin to relish his parents' shocked expressions, it occurs to him that this secret knowledge could have been a bargaining chip. If he had told his father he knew, it could have been ironclad protection from unwinding! How could he be so stupid not to have thought of that when it mattered?

So in the end he can't even enjoy his bitter little victory as the Juvey-cops push him out into a cool December night.

ADVERTISEMENT

Do you have a troubled teen? Can't seem to fit in? Listless and angry? Often prone to fits of impulsive and sometimes dangerous behavior? Does your teen seem unable to stand living in his or her own skin? It could be more than simple teenage rebellion. Your child may be suffering from Biosystemic Disunification Disorder, or BDD.

Well, now there's hope!

Haven Harvest Services has five-star youth camps throughout the nation that will take the angriest, most violent, and dysfunctional sufferers of BDD and carefully ease them into a soothing divided state.

Call now for a free consultation—counselors are standing by!

Haven Harvest Services. When you love them enough to let them go.

The Juvey squad car leaves the driveway with Starkey locked in the backseat behind a bulletproof barrier. Mouthpiece drives while Lady-Lips flips through a fat file folder. Starkey can't imagine his life could have that much data.

"It says here you scored in the top ten percentile in your early childhood exams."

The mouthpiece shakes his head in disgust. "What a waste."

"Not really," says Lady-Lips. "Plenty of folks will get the benefit of your smarts, Mr. Starkey."

The suggestion gives him an unpleasant chill, but he tries not to show it. "Love the lip graft, dude," Starkey says. "What's the deal? Did your wife tell you she'd rather be kissed by a woman?"

Mouthpiece smirks, and Lady-Lips says nothing.

"But enough lip service," says Starkey. "You boys hungry? Because I could go for a midnight snack right about now. Some In-N-Out? Whaddaya say?"

No answer from the front seat. Not that he expects one, but it's always fun to mess with law enforcement and see how much it takes to irritate them. Because if they get ticked off, he wins. What's that story about the Akron AWOL? What did he always say? Oh yeah. "Nice socks." Simple, elegant, but it always undermined the confidence of any figure of false authority.

The Akron AWOL—now *there* was an Unwind! Sure, he died in the attack on Happy Jack Harvest Camp almost a year ago, but his legend lives on. Starkey longs for the kind of notoriety that Connor Lassiter has. In fact, Starkey imagines Connor Lassiter's ghost sitting by his side, appreciating his thoughts and his every action—not just approving, but guiding Starkey's hands as he wriggles his handcuffs down to his left shoe—just low enough to fish out the knife from the lining. The knife he's saved for special occasions like this.

"Come to think about it, In-N-Out Burger does sound good right about now," says Lady-Lips.

"Excellent," says Starkey. "There's one up ahead on the left. Order me a Double-Double, Animal Style, and Animal fries, too, because, hey—I'm an animal."

He is amazed that they actually pull into the all-night drive-through. Starkey feels like the master of subliminal suggestion, even though his suggestion was not all that subliminal. Still, he is in control of the Juvey-cops . . . or at least he thinks he is until they order meals for themselves and nothing for him.

"Hey! What's the deal?" He pounds his shoulder against the glass that separates their world from his.

"They'll feed you at harvest camp," says Lady-Lips.

Only now does it hit home that the bulletproof glass doesn't just separate him from the cops—it's a barrier between him and any part of the outside world. He will never taste his favorite foods again. Never visit his favorite places. At least not as Mason Starkey. Suddenly he feels like hurling up everything he's eaten, backdated to six days postconception.

The night shift cashier at the drive-through window is a girl Starkey knows from his last school. As he sees her, a whole mess of emotions toy with his brain. He could just lurk in the shadows of the backseat, hoping not to be seen, but that would make him feel pathetic. No, he will not be pathetic. If he's going down, then it will be in flames that everyone must see.

"Hey, Amanda, will you go to the prom with me?" He shouts loud enough to be heard through the thick glass barrier.

Amanda squints in his direction, and when she realizes who it is, she turns up her nose as if she's smelled something rancid on the grill.

"Not in this life, Starkey."

"Why not?"

"A, you're a sophomore, and B, you're a loser in the back of a police car. And anyway, don't they have their own prom at the alternative school?"

Could she possibly be any denser? "Uh, as you can see, I've graduated."

"Pipe down," says Mouthpiece, "or I'll unwind you right into the burgers."

Finally Amanda gets it, and suddenly she becomes a little sheepish. "Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, Starkey. I'm really sorry. . . ."

Pity is something Mason Starkey can't stand. "Sorry for what? You and your friends wouldn't give me the time of day before, but now you're sorry for me? Save it."

"I'm sorry. I mean—I'm sorry that I'm sorry—I mean . . ." She sighs in exasperation and gives up, handing Lady-Lips a bag of food. "Do you need ketchup?"

"No, we're good."

"Hey, Amanda!" Starkey shouts as they drive away. "If you really want to do something for me, tell everyone I went down fighting, will you? Tell them I'm just like the Akron AWOL."

"I will, Starkey," she says. "I promise."

But he knows she'll forget by morning.

Twenty minutes later they're turning into the back alley of county lockup. No one goes in the front way, least of all the Unwinds. The county jail has a juvenile wing, and in the back of the juvey wing is a

special box within a box where they hold Unwinds awaiting transport. Starkey's been in regular juvey enough to know that once you're in the Unwind holding cell, that's it. End of story. Even death row inmates don't have such tight security.

But he's not there yet. He's still here, in the car, waiting to be transferred inside. Right here is where the hull of this little ship of fools is thinnest, and if he's going to sink their plans, it has to happen between the car and the back door of the county jail. As they prepare for his "perp walk," he thinks about his chances of breaking free—because as much as his parents may have imagined this night, so has he, and he's made up a dozen valiant escape plans. The thing is, even his daydreams are fatalistic; in every anxiety-filled fantasy, he always loses, gets tranq'd, and wakes up on an operating table. Sure, they say they don't unwind you right away, but Starkey doesn't believe it. No one really knows what goes on in the harvest camps, and those who find out aren't exactly around to share the experience.

They pull him out of the car and flank him on either side, grasping his upper arms tightly. They are practiced in this walk. Lady-Lips grips Starkey's fat file in his other hand.

"So," says Starkey, "does that file show my hobbies?"

"Probably," says Lady-Lips, not really caring either way.

"Maybe you should have read it a little more closely, because then we'd have something to talk about." He grins. "You know, I'm pretty good with magic."

"That so?" says Mouthpiece, with a twisted sneer. "Too bad you can't make yourself disappear."

"Who says I can't?"

Then, in his finest Houdini fashion, he raises his right hand, revealing the cuff no longer on it. Instead, it dangles free from his left hand. Before they can even react, Starkey slides the penknife he used to pick the lock out of his sleeve, grips it in his hand, and slashes it across Lady-Lips's face.

The man screams, and blood flows from a four-inch wound. Mouthpiece, for once in his miserable life of public disservice, is speechless. He reaches for his weapon, but Starkey is already on the run, zigzagging in the shadowy alley.

"Hey!" yells Mouthpiece. "You're only making it worse for yourself."

But what are they going to do? Reprimand him before they unwind him? The Mouthpiece can talk all he wants, but he's got no bargaining position.

The alley turns to the left and then to the right like a maze, and all the while beside him is the tall, imposing brick wall of the county jail.

Finally he turns another corner and sees a street up ahead. He charges forward, but just as he emerges into that street, he's grabbed by Mouthpiece. Somehow he made it there before Starkey. He's surprised, but he shouldn't be, because doesn't every Unwind try to run? And couldn't they build a twisting alley specifically designed to waste your time and give the Juvey-cops an advantage that they never really lost?

"You're through, Starkey!" He crushes Starkey's wrist enough to dislodge the knife and brandishes a tranq gun with trigger-happy fury. "Down on the ground, or this goes in your eye!"

But Starkey does not go down. He will not humble himself before this legalized thug.

"Do it!" says Starkey. "Tranq me in the eye and explain to the harvest camp why the goods are damaged."

Mouthpiece turns him around and pushes him against the brick wall, hard enough to scrape and bruise his face.

"I've had enough of you, Starkey. Or maybe I should call you *Storky*." Then Mouthpiece laughs, like he's a genius. Like every moron in the world hasn't already called him that. "Storky!" he snorts. "That's a better name for you, isn't it? How do you like that, Storky?"

Blood boils hotter than water. Starkey can vouch for that, because with adrenaline-pumped fury, he elbows Mouthpiece in the gut and spins around, grabbing the gun.

"Oh no, you don't."

Mouthpiece is stronger—but maybe animal-style beats strength.

The gun is between them. It points at Starkey's cheek, then his chest, then to Mouthpiece's ear, then under his chin. They both grapple for the trigger and—*Blam!*

The concussive shock of the blast knocks Starkey back against the wall. Blood! Blood everywhere! The ferrous taste of it in his mouth,

and the acrid smell of gun smoke and—

That was no tranq bullet! That was the real thing!

And he thinks he's microseconds away from death, but he suddenly realizes that the blood isn't his. In front of him, Mouthpiece's face is a red, pulpy mess. The man goes down, dead before he hits the pavement and—

My God, that was a real bullet. Why does a Juvey-cop have real bullets? That's illegal!

He can hear footsteps around the bend, and the dead cop is still dead, and he knows the whole world heard the gunshot, and everything hinges on his next action.

He is partners with the Akron AWOL now. The patron saint of runaway Unwinds is watching over his shoulder, waiting for Starkey to make a move, and he thinks, *What would Connor do?*

Just then another Juvey-cop comes around the bend—a cop he has never seen and is determined to never see again. Starkey raises Mouthpiece's gun and shoots, turning what was just an accident into murder.

As he escapes—truly escapes—all he can think about is the bloody taste of victory, and how pleased the ghost of Connor Lassiter would be.

ADVERTISEMENT

Does your child struggle in school? Study for hours but still can't seem to bring up those grades? You've tried tutoring, even changing schools, and still no results. How much longer will you make your child suffer?

The answer is: no more! Because we have the solution! Natural cognitive enhancement through NeuroWeave™.

Memory-specific NeuroWeaving is not some questionable mind enhancement drug or dangerous wet-wire chip. It's actual living brain tissue preprogrammed with the subject of your choice. Algebra, trigonometry, biology, physics—and more subjects are on the way!

Affordable financing is available, so don't wait for that next bad report card. Take action now! Call The NeuroWeave Institute today for your free quote. Our results are 100 percent guaranteed or your money back.

The NeuroWeave Institute: When education fails, we'll give you straight As!

To be an AWOL Unwind is one thing, but to be a cop killer is another. The manhunt for Starkey becomes more than just your typical Unwind chase. It seems the whole world is put on alert. First Starkey changes his look, dying his straggly brown hair red, cutting it bookworm-short, and shaving off the little victory garden goatee that he's been cultivating since middle school. Now when people see him, they might get a feeling they've seen him before, but not know from where, because now he looks less like a face from a wanted poster and more like someone you'd see on a Wheaties box. The red hair is a bit of a disconnect with his olive complexion, but then, being a genetic hodgepodge has served him well all his life. He's always been a chameleon who could pass for any ethnicity. The red hair just adds one more level of misdirection.

He skips town and never stays anywhere for more than a day or two. Word is that the Pacific Northwest is more sympathetic to AWOL Unwinds than Southern California, so that's where he's headed.

Starkey is prepared for life as a fugitive, because he has always lived in a kind of protective paranoia. Don't trust anyone, not even your own shadow, and look out for your own best interests. His friends appreciated his clear-cut approach to life, because they always knew where they stood. He would fight to the end for his friends . . . as long as it was in his own interest to do so.

"You have the soul of a corporation," a teacher once told him. It was meant as an insult, but he took it as a compliment. Corporations have great power and do fine things in this world when they choose to. She was a glacier-hugging math teacher who got laid off the following year, because who needs math teachers when you can just get a NeuroWeave? Just goes to show you, hugging a chunk of ice gets you nothing but cold.

Now, however, Starkey's one with the huggers, because they're the kind of people who run the Anti-Divisional Resistance, harboring runaway Unwinds. Once he's in the hands of the ADR, he knows he'll be safe, but finding them is the hard part.

"I've been AWOL for almost four months now and haven't seen no sign of the resistance," says an ugly kid with a bulldog face. Starkey met him while hanging out behind a KFC on Christmas Eve, waiting

for them to throw out the leftover chicken. He's not the kind of kid Starkey would hang with in real life, but now that real life has flipped into borrowed time, his priorities have changed.

"I've survived because I don't fall for no traps," Dogface tells him.

Starkey knows all about the traps. If a hiding place seems too good to be true, it probably is. An abandoned house with a comfortable mattress; an unlocked truck that happens to be full of canned food. They're traps set by Juvey-cops for AWOL Unwinds. There are even Juvies pretending to be part of the Anti-Divisional Resistance.

"The Juvies are offering rewards now for people who turn in AWOLs," Dogface says, as they stuff themselves sick with chicken. "And there are bounty hunters, too. *Parts pirates*, they call 'em. They don't bother with collecting rewards—they sell the AWOLs they catch on the black market—and if you think regular harvest camps are bad, you don't wanna know about the illegal ones." The kid swallows a mouthful so big, Starkey can see it going down his gullet like a mouse being swallowed by a snake. "There never used to be parts pirates," he says, "but since seventeen-year-olds can't be unwound no more, there's a shortage of parts, and AWOLs fetch a huge price on the black market."

Starkey shakes his head. Making it illegal to unwind seventeen-year-olds was supposed to save a fifth of the kids marked for unwinding, but instead it forced a lot of parents to make their decision earlier. Starkey wonders if his parents would have changed their mind if they had another year to decide.

"Parts pirates are the worst," Dogface tells him. "Their traps aren't so nice as the ones the Juvies set. I heard this story about a trapper who got put out of business when fur was made illegal. So he took his heaviest animal traps and retooled them for Unwinds. Man, one of those traps snaps around your leg, and you can kiss that leg good-bye." He snaps a chicken bone in half for emphasis, and Starkey shivers in spite of himself. "There are other stories," Dogface says, licking chicken grease from his dirty fingers, "like this kid in my old neighborhood. His parents were total losers. Strung-out druggies who prolly shoulda been unwound themselves, if they had unwinding back

in the day. Anyway, on his thirteenth birthday, they sign the unwind order and tell him about it."

"Why would they tell him?"

"So he'd run away," Dogface explains, "but see, they knew all his secret hiding places, and they told a parts pirate where to find him. He caught the kid, sold him, and split the fee with the kid's parents."

"Son of a bitch!"

Dogface shrugs, and flicks away a chicken bone. "The kid was a stork-job anyways, so it was no great loss, right?"

Starkey stops chewing, but just for a moment. Then he grins, keeping his thoughts to himself. "Right. No great loss."

That night the dogfaced kid takes Starkey to a drainage tunnel where he's been hiding out, and once the kid falls asleep, Starkey gets to work. He goes out into a nearby neighborhood and leaves a bucket of chicken at some strangers' front door, rings the bell, and runs.

There's no chicken in the bucket, though. Instead there's a hand-drawn map, along with the following note:

Need money? Then send the Juvey-cops here, and you'll collect a fat reward. Happy holidays!

Right around dawn, Starkey watches from a nearby rooftop as Juvies storm the drainage tunnel and pull out the dogfaced kid like so much earwax.

"Congratulations, asshole," he says to himself. "You've been storked."

ADVERTISEMENT

"When my parents signed the unwind order, I was scared. I didn't know what would happen to me. I thought, 'Why me? Why am I being punished?' But once I got to BigSky Harvest Camp, all that changed. I found other kids like me and was finally accepted for who I was. I found out that every single part of me was precious and valuable. Thanks to the people at BigSky Harvest Camp, I'm not afraid of my unwinding anymore.

"The divided state? Wow. What an adventure!"

Every AWOL Unwind will steal. It's an argument that the authorities like to use to convince the public that Unwinds are rotten apples from skin to core—that criminality is part of their very nature, and the only way to separate them from it is to separate them from themselves.

Theft, however, is not about predisposition when it comes to Unwinds. It's simply a matter of necessity. Kids who would never steal a penny find their fingers stickier than molasses and full of all sorts of pilfered goods, from food to clothes to medicine—the various things they need to survive—and those who were already prone to crime simply become even more so.

Starkey is no stranger to criminal activity—although until recently most of his crimes were misdemeanors of the rebellious sort. He shoplifted if a shopkeeper looked at him suspiciously. He tagged bits of his own personal philosophy, which usually involved some choice four-letter words, on buildings that stood for the very things that ticked him off. He even stole a car from a neighbor who always made his young children go inside whenever Starkey came out. He took that guy's car on a joyride with a couple of friends. Fun was had by all. Along the way he sideswiped a row of parked cars, losing two hub-caps and a bumper. Their ride ended when the car jumped a curb and mounted a very unresponsive mailbox. The damage was just enough to have the car labeled a total loss, which was exactly what Starkey wanted.

They never could prove it was him, but everybody knew. He had to admit, it wasn't one of his shining moments, but he knew he had had to do something to a man who didn't think Starkey was good enough to breathe the same air as his own children. The guy simply had to be punished for that kind of behavior.

All of it seemed to pale now that he was a murderer. But no—It would do him no good to think of himself that way. Better to think of himself as a warrior: a foot soldier in the war against unwinding. Soldiers were given medals for taking out the enemy, weren't they? So even though that night in the alley still plagues him in moments of insecurity, most of the time his conscience is clear. His conscience is also clear when he begins parting people from their wallets.

Starkey, imagining himself as a big-time Las Vegas magician someday, used to amaze friends and terrify adults by making their

watches disappear off their wrists and turn up in other people's pockets. It was a simple parlor trick, but one that had taken lots of time to perfect. Making wallets and purses disappear followed the same principle. A combination of distraction, skilled fingers, and the confidence to get it done.

On this night, Starkey's mark is a man who comes stumbling drunk out of a bar and slips an overstuffed wallet into the wide pocket of his overcoat. The drunk fumbles with his keys on the way to his car. Starkey strolls past, bumping him just hard enough to dislodge the keys, and they fall to the ground.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry," Starkey says, picking up the keys and handing them to him. The man never feels the fingers of Starkey's other hand in his pocket, lifting the wallet at the same moment Starkey's handing him the keys. Starkey strolls off whistling to himself, knowing the man will be halfway home before he realizes that his wallet is gone, and even then, he'll think he just left it at the bar.

Starkey turns a corner, making sure he's out of sight before he opens the wallet, and the second he does, a jolt of electricity courses through him with such power his feet fall out from under him and he's left semiconscious on the ground, twitching.

A stun-wallet. He's heard of such things but never saw one in action until now.

Within seconds, the drunk is there, not so drunk after all, with three others whose faces he can't make out. They lift him up and shove him into the back of a waiting van.

As the door is pulled closed and the van accelerates, Starkey, only barely conscious, sees the face of the drunk/not-drunk man looking down at him through an electrically charged haze.

"Are you an Unwind, a runaway, or just a lowlife?" he asks.

Starkey's lips feel like rubber. "Lowlife."

"Great," says the un-drunk. "That narrows it down. Unwind or runaway?"

"Runaway," mumbles Starkey.

"Perfect," the man says. "Now that we've established you're an Unwind, we know what to do with you."

Starkey groans, and some woman beyond his limited peripheral vision laughs. "Don't be so surprised. Unwinds all got this look in their eye that lowlifes and runaways don't. We knew the truth without you saying a thing."

Starkey tries to move, but he can barely lift his limbs.

"Don't," says a girl he can't see from somewhere behind him. "Don't move or I'll zap you even worse than the wallet did."

Starkey knows he's fallen for a parts pirate's trap. He thought he was smarter, and he silently curses his luck . . . until the man who pretended to be drunk says, "You'll like this safe house. Good food, even if it does smell a little."

"Wh-what?"

Laughs from everyone around him. There may be four or five people in the van. But his vision still isn't clear enough to get an accurate count.

"I love that look on their faces," the woman says. Now she comes into his field of vision and grins at him. "You know how they tranq escaped lions so they can bring them back to safety before they get themselves in a heap of trouble?" she says. "Well, today you're the lion."

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"Hi, kids! Watchdog Walter here, eyes open and nose to the ground! Not everyone can be a bloodhound like me, but now you can join my Junior Watchdog Club! You'll receive your own Junior Watchdog kit, and a monthly newsletter with games and tips on spotting crime in your own neighborhood, from suspicious strangers to Unwind 'danger-houses!' With you on the job, bad guys and AWOLs don't stand a chance! So join today! And remember, Junior Watchdogs—eyes open and nose to the ground!"

Sponsored by Neighborhood Watch Inc.

The safe house is a sewer pump station. Automated. No city workers ever show up unless something breaks.

"You get used to the smell," Starkey is told as they bring him in, which he finds hard to believe—but it turns out to be true. Apparently

one's sense of smell realizes it's going to lose the battle and just goes with it—and, as they told him in the van, the food makes up for it.

The whole place is a petri dish of angst, generated by kids whose parents gave up on them, which is the worst kind of angst there is. There are fights and ridiculous posturing on a daily basis.

Starkey's always been a natural leader among sketchy outcasts and borderline personalities, and the safe house is no exception. He quickly rises in the social ranks. Word of his escape act is already churning out smoke in the rumor mill, helping his status from the very beginning.

"Is it true you shot two Juvey-cops?"

"Yep."

"Is it true you shot your way out of lockup with a machine gun?"

"Sure, why not?"

And the best part is that the storked kids—who, even among Unwinds, are treated like second-class citizens—are now the elite, thanks to him!

Starkey says the storks get served first? They get served first. Starkey says they get the best beds, farthest from the stinking vents? They get the best beds. His word is law. Even those running the place know that Starkey is their greatest asset, and they know to keep him happy, because if he becomes an enemy, then every Unwind there is an enemy too.

He starts to settle in, figuring he'll be there until he's seventeen—but then in the middle of the night they're rounded up and taken away by the ADR—shuffled like a deck of cards to different safe houses.

"This is the way it works," they're all told. The reason, Starkey comes to understand, is twofold. One, it keep the kids moving closer to their destination, wherever that might be. Two, it splits them apart to keep any alliances from becoming permanent. Kind of like unwinding the mob rather than the individuals to keep them in line.

Their plan, however, backfires with Starkey, because in each safe house he manages to earn respect, building his credibility among more and more kids. In each new location he comes across Unwinds who fancy themselves alpha males, trying to take charge, but in truth

they're just betas waiting for an alpha to humble them into submission.

In every instance, Starkey finds his opportunity to challenge, defeat, and rise above. Then there's another midnight ride, another shake-up, and a new safe house. Each time Starkey learns a new social skill, something to serve him, something to make him even more effective at gathering and galvanizing these scared, angry kids. There could be no better leadership program than the safe houses of the Anti-Divisional Resistance.

And then come the coffins.

They show up at the final safe house: a shipment of lacquered wood caskets with rich satin linings. Most kids are terrified; Starkey is just amused.

"Get in!" they're told by armed resistance fighters who look more like special ops. "No questions, just get in. Two to a box! Move it!"

Some kids hesitate, but the smarter ones quickly find a partner like it's a sudden square dance, and nobody wants to be stuck with someone too tall, too fat, too unwashed, or too randy—because none of those things would fare well in the confines of a coffin—but no one actually gets in until Starkey gives the nod.

"If they meant to bury us," he tells them, "they would have done it already." As it turns out, he's more persuasive than the guys with the guns.

He chooses to share his little box with a wisp of a girl who is giddy at having been chosen by him. Not that he particularly likes her, but she is so slight that she'll barely take up any room. Once they're wedged in together in a tight spoon position, they're handed an oxygen tank and then closed into the darkness of the coffin together.

"I've always liked you, Mason," says the girl, whose name he can't recall. He's surprised that she knows his first name, since he never uses it anymore. "Of all the boys in the safe houses, you're the only one who makes me feel safe."

He doesn't respond; he just kisses her on the back of her head, to maintain his image as the safest port in her storm. It's a powerful feeling to know you make others feel safe.

"We . . . *could*, you know . . . ," she says coyly.

He reminds her that the ADR workers were very clear. "No extracurricular activities," they had said, "or you'll use up your oxygen and die." Starkey doesn't know if it's true, but it certainly is a good argument for restraint. Besides, even if someone were stupid enough to tempt fate, there's not enough space to move, much less generate any sort of friction, so the point is moot. He wonders if it's some sort of twisted joke the adults are having, shoving hormonal teens into tight quarters but making it impossible to do anything but breathe.

"I wouldn't mind suffocating if it was with you," the girl says, which is flattering, but makes him even less interested in her.

"There'll be a better time," he tells her, knowing that such a time will never come—at least not for her—but hope is a powerful motivator.

Eventually they settle into a sort of symbiotic breathing rhythm. He breathes in when she breathes out, so their chests don't fight for space.

After a while, there's a jarring motion. With his arm now around the girl, he holds her a little more tightly, knowing that easing her fear somehow eases his own. Soon there's a strange kind of acceleration, like they're in a speeding car, but the angle changes, tilting them.

"A plane?" asks the girl.

"I think so."

"What now?"

He doesn't answer because he doesn't know. Starkey begins to feel light-headed and, remembering the oxygen tank, turns the valve so that it slowly hisses. The coffin isn't quite air tight, but closed tightly enough that they would suffocate without that oxygen, even in the pressurized hull of a plane. In a few minutes the stress-induced exhaustion puts the girl to sleep, but not Starkey. Finally, an hour later, the sudden jar of landing jolts the girl awake.

"Where do you think we are?" the girl asks.

Starkey is feeling irritable from the tight quarters but tries not to show it. "We'll find out soon enough."

Twenty minutes of anticipation, and finally the lid is unlatched and opened, resurrecting the two of them from the dead.

There's a smiling kid with braces above them.

“Hello, I’m Hayden, and I’ll be your personal savior today,” he says brightly. “Oh look! No vomit or other unpleasant bodily fluids. Lucky you!”

With barely any blood circulating in his feet, Starkey joins a limping procession out of the jet’s cargo hold and into the blinding day. What he sees before him as his eyes adjust seems more like a mirage than anything real.

It’s a desert filled with thousands of airplanes.

Starkey’s heard of places like this, airplane boneyards where decommissioned aircraft go to die. Around them are teens in military camouflage, carrying weapons. They’re not unlike the adults back at the last safe house, just younger. They herd the kids into a loose formation at the bottom of the ramp.

A Jeep drives up. Clearly this is the approach of someone important, someone who will tell them why they’re here.

The Jeep comes to a halt, and out steps an unremarkable-looking teenager in blue camouflage. He’s Starkey’s age or maybe a little bit older, and he has scars on the right half of his face.

As the crowd gets a good look at him, people begin to murmur with excitement. The kid raises his hand to quiet them down, and Starkey spots a shark tattoo on his arm.

“No way!” a fat kid next to Starkey says. “You know who that is? That’s the Akron AWOL! That’s Connor Lassiter.”

Starkey scoffs, “Don’t be ridiculous, the Akron AWOL is dead.”

“No, he ain’t! He’s right there!”

The very idea sends a surge of adrenaline through Starkey’s body, finally bringing circulation back to his limbs. But no—as he looks at this teen trying to rein in the chaos, he realizes this couldn’t be Connor Lassiter. This kid does not look the part at all. His hair is tousled, not coolly slicked back, the way Starkey always imagined it would be. This kid looks too open and honest—not quite innocent, but he has nowhere near the level of jaded anger that the Akron AWOL would have. The only thing about him that could even slightly resemble Starkey’s image of Connor Lassiter would be the slight smirk that always seems to be on his face. No, this kid before them, trying to command their respect, is nobody special. Nobody at all.

"Let me be the first to welcome you to the Graveyard," he says, delivering what must be the same speech he delivers to every batch of new arrivals. "Officially my name is Elvis Robert Mullard . . . but my friends call me Connor."

Cheers from the Unwinds.

"Told you so!" says the fat kid.

"Doesn't prove anything," says Starkey, his jaw set and teeth clenched as the speech continues.

"You're all here because you were marked for unwinding but escaped, and thanks to the efforts of a whole lot of people with the Anti-Divisional Resistance, you've made it here. This will be your home until you turn seventeen and can't be unwound. That's the good news. . . ."

The more he speaks, the more Starkey's heart sinks, and he comes to realize the truth of it. This *is* the Akron AWOL—and he's not larger than life at all. In fact, he barely lives up to reality.

"The bad news is that the Juvenile Authority knows about us. They know where we are and what we're doing—but so far they've left us alone."

Starkey marvels at the unfairness of it all. How could this be? How is it possible that the great champion of runaway Unwinds is just some ordinary kid?

"Some of you just want to survive to seventeen, and I don't blame you," Connor says. "But I know that many of you would risk everything to end unwinding forever."

"Yeah!" Starkey shouts out, making sure it's loud enough to draw everyone's attention away from Connor, and he starts pumping his fist in the air. "Happy Jack! Happy Jack! Happy Jack!" He gets a whole chant going in the crowd. "We'll blow up every last harvest camp!" Starkey shouts. Yet even though he's riled them up, one look from Connor throws a wet blanket over the whole crowd, silencing them.

"There's one in every crowd," says Hayden, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but we will *not* be blowing up Chop Shops," Connor says, looking right at Starkey. "They already see us as violent, and the Juvies use public fear to justify unwinding. We can't

feed into that. We're not clappers. We will not commit random acts of violence. We will *think* before we act. . . ."

Starkey does not take the reprimand well. Who is this guy to shut him down? He keeps talking, but Starkey's not listening anymore, because Connor has nothing to say to him. But the others listen, and that makes Starkey burn.

Now, as he stands there, waiting for the so-called Akron AWOL to shut up, a seed starts to take root in Starkey's mind. He has killed two Juvey-cops. His legend is already set, and unlike Connor, he didn't have to pretend to die to become legendary. Starkey has to smile. This airplane salvage yard is filled with hundreds of Unwinds, but in the end, it's no different from the safe houses—and like those safe houses, here is just one more beta male waiting for an alpha like Starkey to put him in his place.

OceanofPDF.com

2 · Miracolina

The girl has known since before she can remember that her body has been sanctified to God.

She has always been aware that on her thirteenth birthday she would be tithed and would experience the glorious mystery of having a divided body and a networked soul. Not networked in the computer sense—for the pouring of one's soul into hardware happens only in the movies, and never to good results. No, this would be a *true* networking within living flesh. A stretching of her spirit among the dozens of people touched by her divided body. There are people who say it's death, but she believes it to be something else—something mystical, and she believes it with every ounce of her soul.

"I suppose one cannot know what such division is like until one experiences it," her priest once told her. It struck her as odd that the priest, who was always so confident in church dogma, spoke of uncertainty whenever he talked about tithing.

"The Vatican has yet to take a position on unwinding," he pointed out, "and so until it is either condoned or condemned, I can be as uncertain about it as I please."

It always made her bristle when he called tithing unwinding, as if they were the same thing. They're not. The way she sees it, the cursed and unwanted are unwound—but the blessed and the loved are tithed. The process might be the same, but the intent is different, and in this world, intent is everything.

Her name is Miracolina—from the Italian word for "miracle." She was named this because she was conceived to save her brother's life. Her brother, Matteo, was diagnosed with leukemia when he was ten. The family had moved from Rome to Chicago for his treatment, but even with harvest banks all over the nation, a marrow match could not be found for his rare blood type. The only way to save him was to create a match—and so that's exactly what his parents did. Nine months later Miracolina was born, doctors took marrow from her hip

and gave it to Matteo, and her brother was saved. Easy as that. Now he's twenty-four and in graduate school, all thanks to Miracolina.

Even before she understood what it meant to be a tithe, she knew she was 10 percent of a larger whole. "We had ten embryos in vitro," her mother once told her. "Only one was a match for Matteo, and that was you. You were no accident, *mi carina*. We chose you."

The law was very specific when it came to the other nine embryos. Her family had to pay nine women to carry them to term. After that, the surrogates could do as they pleased—either raise the babies or stork them to a good home. "But whatever it cost, it was worth it," her parents had told her, "to have both Matteo and you."

Now, as her tithing approaches, it comforts Miracolina to know that she has nine fraternal twins out there—and who knows? Maybe a part of her divided self will go to help one of these unknown twins.

As to why she is being tithed, it has nothing to do with percentages.

"We made a pact with God," her parents told her when she was young, "that if you were born, and Matteo was saved, we would show our gratitude by gifting you back to God through tithing." Miracolina understood, even at an early age, that such a powerful pact was not easily broken.

Lately, however, her parents have become more and more emotional at the thought of it. "Forgive us," they begged her over and over again—quite often in tears. "Please forgive us for this thing we've done." And she would always forgive them, even though the request baffled her. Miracolina always felt blessed to be a tithe—to know, without question, her destiny and her purpose. Why should her parents feel sorry for giving her a purpose?

Perhaps the guilt they feel is for not throwing her a big party—but then, that had been her own choice. "First of all," she told her parents, "a tithing should be solemn, not loud. Secondly, who's going to come?"

They couldn't dispute her logic. While most tithes come from rich communities, and belong to the kinds of churches that expect tithing, theirs is a working-class neighborhood that's not exactly tithe-friendly. When you're like those rich families, surrounding yourself with like-minded people, there are plenty of friends to support you at a tithing party—enough to offset the guests who find it uncomfortable. But if

Miracolina had a party, everyone there would feel awkward. That's not how she wanted to spend her last night with her family.

So there's no party. Instead she spends the evening in front of the fireplace, sitting between her parents and clicking through favorite scenes from favorite movies. Her mom even prepares her favorite meal, rigatoni Amatriciana. "Bold and spicy," her mom says, "just like you."

She sleeps that night, having no unpleasant dreams, or at least none she can remember, and in the morning she rises early, dresses in her simple daily whites, and tells her parents that she's going to school. "The van doesn't come for me until four this afternoon, so why waste the day?"

Although her parents would prefer she stay home with them, her wishes come first on this day.

At school, she sits through classes, already feeling a dreamy distance from it all. At the end of each class, the teacher awkwardly hands her all her collected classwork and grades, calculated early.

"Well then, I guess that's that," each teacher says in one way or another. Most of them can't wait for her to get out of their room. Her science teacher is the kindest, though, taking some extra time with her.

"My nephew was tithed a few years ago," he tells her. "A wonderful boy. I miss him terribly." He pauses, seeming to go far away in his thoughts. "I was told his heart went to a firefighter who saved a dozen people from a burning building. I don't know if it's true, but I'd like to believe it is."

Miracolina would like to believe it too.

Throughout the day, her classmates are just as awkward as her teachers. Some kids make a point to say good-bye. Some even give her uncomfortable hugs, but the rest say their farewells from a safe distance, as if tithing is somehow contagious.

And then there are the other ones. The cruel ones.

"See you *here and there*," a boy says behind her back during lunch, and the kids around him snicker. Miracolina turns, and the boy tries to hide behind his gaggle of friends, thinking he's safe within that cloud of rank middle-school perspiration—but she recognized his voice and

knows exactly who it is. She pushes through his friends to coldly face him.

"Oh, you won't see me, Zach Rasmussen . . . but if any part of me sees you, I will definitely let you know."

Zach's face goes a little green. "Get lost," he says. "Go get tithed." But still there's that look of uneasy fear beneath his idiotic bravado.

Good, thinks Miracolina, *I hope I've given him a few nightmares.*

Her school is a huge one, so even though tithes aren't common in her neighborhood, there are four others, all dressed in white like her. There used to be six, but the oldest two are already gone. These remaining tithes are her true friends. These are the ones to whom she feels a need to say one last good-bye. Oddly, they're all from different backgrounds and faiths. Each is a member of a splinter sect of their particular religion—a sect that takes its commitment to self-sacrifice very seriously. Funny, Miracolina thinks, how these same religions fought over their differences for thousands of years, and yet in tithing, they all come together as one.

"We are all asked to give of ourselves—to be charitable and selfless," says Nestor, her tithe friend closest to her in age, only a month short of his own tithing. He clasps her hands, giving Miracolina a warm good-bye. "If technology allows us a new way to give, how could it be wrong?"

Except there are people who *do* say that it's wrong. More and more people these days. There's even that ex-tithe out there—the one who became a clapper, who people hold up as an example. Well, how stable can *he* be? After all, he became a clapper, for goodness' sake. The way Miracolina sees it, if someone would rather blow themselves up than be tithed, well, that's like stealing from the collection plate, isn't it? It's just plain wrong.

When the school day ends, she walks home just like on any other day. As she comes onto her street, she sees her brother's car in the driveway. She's surprised at first—he goes to school five hours away—but she's happy Matteo's come to see her off.

It's three o'clock, an hour until the van comes, and her parents are already crying. She wishes they weren't, that they could take this as

stoically as she, or even Matteo, who spends his time chatting about only the good memories.

"Remember that time we went to Rome, and you wanted to play hide-and-seek in the Vatican Museum?"

Miracolina smiles at the memory. She had tried to hide in Nero's bathtub—this huge maroon stone bowl that could practically fit an elephant. "The security guards had a fit! I thought they'd take me to the pope, and he'd spank me—so I ran."

Matteo laughs. "You went missing for, like, an hour—Mom and Dad were pulling their hair out."

Missing isn't the word for it, though. You don't go missing in a museum—you just get temporarily absorbed by the walls. She remembers moving through the crowds of the Vatican, until she found herself standing in the middle of the Sistine Chapel, gazing up toward Michelangelo's masterpiece, which covered the walls and ceiling. And there in the center was the divine link between heaven and earth. So close was Adam's hand to the hand of God, both straining to touch each other, but the impossible weight of gravity kept Adam from truly touching the heavens.

She stood there, looking up, forgetting that she was supposed to be hiding, for who could hide in a place that was all about revealed mystery? And that's exactly where her family found her; amid hundreds of tourists, staring up at the greatest work of art ever created by the hand of man—humanity's grandest attempt to touch perfection.

She was only six, but even then, the images of the chapel spoke to her, although she had no idea what they said. All she knew was that she herself was just like this beautiful place, and if someone could go inside her, they would see glorious frescoes painted on the walls of her soul.

The van arrives ten minutes early and waits out front. There's a brightly painted logo on the van's side that reads wood hollow harvest camp! a place for teens!

Miracolina goes to her room to get her suitcase—a small one filled with just a few sets of tithing whites and some basic necessities. Now her parents cry and cry, begging again for her forgiveness. This time, however, it just angers her.

"If tithing makes you feel guilty, that's not my problem," she tells them, "because I'm at peace with it. Please have enough respect for me to be at peace with it too."

It doesn't help matters. It just makes their tears flow in a steadier stream.

"The only reason you're at peace with it," her father tells her, "is because we made you feel that way. It's our fault. It's all our fault."

Miracolina looks at them and shrugs. "So change your mind, then," she suggests. "Break your pact with God and don't tithe me."

They look back at her like she's giving them a glorious gift, a reprieve from hell. Even Matteo is hopeful.

"Yes, that's what we'll do!" her mother says. "We haven't signed the final papers yet. We can still change our minds!"

"Fine," says Miracolina. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes," says her father with intense relief. "Yes, we're sure."

"Positive?"

"Yes."

"Good, now you can be guilt free." Miracolina picks up her suitcase. "But regardless of what you choose, I'm going anyway. That's *my* choice."

Then she hugs her mother, father, and brother and leaves without looking back—without even saying good-bye, because good-byes imply an end, and more than anything else in this life, Miracolina Roselli wants to believe that her tithing is a beginning.

ADVERTISEMENT

"When Billy's behavior became too much for us to bear, and we began to fear for our own safety, we did the only humane thing. We sent him to harvest camp, so he could find fulfillment in a divided state. But now, with an age restriction preventing seventeen-year-olds from being unwound, we wouldn't have had that choice. Just last week a seventeen-year-old girl in our neighborhood got drunk, crashed her car, and killed two innocent people. Would it still have happened if her parents could have chosen to send her to harvest camp? You tell me."

VOTE YES ON PROP 46! End the Cap-17 law, and lift the ban on late-teen unwinding!

Paid for by Citizens for a Wholesome Tomorrow

It's a three-hour drive to Wood Hollow Harvest Camp. The van is all plush leather seats and pop music pumped through expensive speakers. The driver is a man with a salt-and-pepper beard, a big smile, and just enough of a gut to be jolly. Santa Claus in training.

"Excited for your big day?" Chauffeur-Claus asks as they drive away from Miracolina's home and family. "Did you have a big tithing party?"

"Yes, and no," she says. "I'm excited, but no party."

"Aww . . . that's too bad. Why not?"

"Because tithing shouldn't be about me."

"Oh," is all Chauffeur-Claus can say to that. Miracolina's response is the perfect conversation killer, which is fine. The last thing she wants is to recap her life for this man, no matter how jolly he is.

"There are drinks in the cooler," he tells her. "Help yourself." And then he leaves her alone.

Twenty minutes into the drive, instead of turning onto the interstate, they enter a gated community.

"One more pickup this afternoon," Chauffeur-Claus tells her. "Tuesdays are lean, so it's just this stop. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

They stop at a house that's at least three times larger than her own, where a boy in white waits out front with his family. She does not watch as he says his good-byes. She looks out of the other window, giving them their privacy. Finally Chauffeur-Claus opens the door, and in comes a boy with straight dark hair, perfectly trimmed, bright blue eyes, and skin as pale as bone china—as if he had been kept out of the sun all his life to keep his skin pure as a baby's bottom for his tithing.

"Hi," he says shyly. His tithing whites are shiny satin and trimmed in fine gold brocade. This boy's parents spared no expense. Miracolina's tithing whites, on the other hand, are simple raw silk, unbleached so their whiteness won't be so blinding that it draws attention to itself. Compared to hers, this boy's whites are like a neon advertisement.

The seats in the van aren't in rows—they all face center, to encourage camaraderie. The boy sits across from Miracolina, thinks for a moment, then reaches across the gap, offering his hand for her to

shake. “I’m Timothy,” he says. She shakes his hand. It’s clammy and cold, like the way your hands get before a school play.

“My name’s Miracolina.”

“Wow, that’s a mouthful!” Then he chuckles, probably mad at himself for saying it. “Do people call you Mira, or Lina, or something to shorten it?”

“It’s Miracolina,” she tells him. “And no one shortens it.”

“Okay, well, pleased to meet you, Miracolina.”

The van starts up, and Timothy waves good-bye to his large family still outside, and although they wave to him as well, it’s clear that they can’t even see him through the dark glass. The van pulls out and begins to wind out of the neighborhood. Even before they leave the gate, Timothy begins to look uncomfortable, like he’s got a stomachache, but Miracolina knows if his stomach bothers him, it’s just a symptom of something else. This boy has not found peace with his tithing yet. Or if he had, he lost it the moment the van door closed, cutting the umbilical to his old life. As insulted as she is by his lavish whites and exclusive neighborhood, Miracolina begins to feel sorry for him. His fear hangs in the air around them like a web full of black widows. No one should journey to their tithing in terror.

“So, the ride is like three hours, or something?” Timothy asks, his voice shaky.

“Yes,” says Chauffeur-Claus brightly. “There’s an entertainment system with hundreds of preprogrammed movies to pass the time. Help yourselves!”

“Yeah, okay, sure,” says Timothy. “Maybe later, though.”

For a few minutes, he seems lost in his own thoughts. Then he turns to Miracolina again.

“They say tithes get treated really well at harvest camp. You think it’s true? They say it’s lots of fun, and we’re with tons of other kids just like us.” He clears his throat. “They say we even get to choose the day when we . . . when we . . . well, you know . . .”

Miracolina smiles at him warmly. Usually tithes like Timothy go to harvest camp in a limo—but she knows why Timothy didn’t, without having to ask. He didn’t want to make the journey alone. Well, if fate

has brought them together on this momentous day, she will be the friend he needs.

"I'm sure harvest camp will be just the experience you want it to be," she tells him, "and when you choose your date, you'll choose it because you're ready. That's why they let us choose. So it's *our* decision, no one else's."

Timothy looks into her with those piercing perfect eyes. "You're not scared at all, are you?"

She chooses to answer his question with another question. "Have you ever been on an airplane?" she asks him.

"Huh?" Timothy is thrown by the change of subject. "Yeah, a bunch of times."

"Were you scared the first time you flew?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess."

"But you went anyway. Why?"

Timothy shrugs. "I wanted to get where I was going, and my parents were with me and said it would be okay."

"Well," says Miracolina, "there you go."

Timothy looks at her, blinking with a kind of innocence Miracolina doesn't think she ever had. "So then, you're not scared?"

She sighs. "Yes, I'm scared," she admits. "Very scared. But when you trust that it will all be okay, you can enjoy the fear. You can use it to help you instead of letting it hurt you."

"Oh, I get it," says Timothy. "It's like a scary movie, you know? You can have fun with it because you know it's not real no matter how scared it makes you." Then he thinks about it a bit more. "But getting unwound *is* real. It's not like we're going to walk out of the theater and go home. It's not like I'm going to get off a plane and be in Disneyland."

"Tell you what," Miracolina says, before Timothy can drag himself back into his pit of spider-filled despair. "Let's watch one of those scary movies and get it all out of our systems before we get to harvest camp."

Timothy nods obediently. "Yeah, sure, okay."

But as she scrolls through all the preprogrammed movies, none of them are scary. They're all family films and comedies.

“It’s okay,” says Timothy. “To tell you the truth, I don’t like scary movies anyway.”

In a few minutes, they’re on the interstate making good time. Timothy contents himself with video games to keep his mind from going to dark places, and Miracolina puts in her earphones, listening to her own eclectic mix of music, rather than the van’s vapid pop tunes. There are 2,129 songs in her iChip, and she’s determined to listen to as many as she can before the day she enters the divided state.

About two hours and thirty songs later, the van exits the interstate and turns down a scenic road winding through dense woods. “Just half an hour now,” Chauffeur-Claus tells them. “We made good time!”

Then, as they come around a bend, he slams on the brakes, and the van screeches to a halt.

Miracolina takes off her earphones. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Stay here,” orders Chauffeur-Claus, no longer jolly, and he jumps out of the van.

Timothy already has his nose pressed against the window, looking out. “This can’t be good.”

“No,” agrees Miracolina. “It can’t.”

Just off the road in a ditch is another Wood Hollow Harvest Camp van, but this one is overturned, wheels to the sky. There’s no telling how long it has been there.

“He must have blown a tire or something, and skidded off the road,” says Timothy. But none of the tires look blown.

“We should call for help,” says Miracolina—but no one brings a phone to harvest camp, so neither she nor Timothy has one.

Just then there’s a commotion outside. Half a dozen people dressed in black with faces hidden by ski masks come leaping out of the woods from all directions. The chauffeur is hit with a tranq bullet to the neck and goes down like an overstuffed rag doll.

“Lock the door!” shouts Miracolina, and doesn’t wait. She pushes Timothy out of the way to get to the driver’s unlocked door—but she’s not fast enough. Just as she reaches for the lock, the door is pulled open, and the assailant hits the button that pops all the locks. All the

van's doors are pulled open at once by the masked attackers. Clearly these attackers have done this before and have gotten good at it. Timothy screams as hands reach in, pulling him out. He tries to wriggle free, but it's useless. If his fear is a web, then the spiders have got him.

Two more figures reach for Miracolina, and she drops to the floor, kicking at them.

"Don't you touch me! Don't you touch me!"

Her fear, which had been so well under control, explodes from her now, because this violation of her journey is a far greater unknown than harvest camp. She kicks, and bites, and claws in terror and outrage, but it's no use—because in the end, she hears the telltale *pffft* of a tranq gun firing. She feels the sharp jab of the tranq bullet as it embeds itself in her arm, and the world goes dark as she spirals helplessly into that timeless place where all sedated souls go.

ADVERTISEMENT

"You don't know me, but you know someone like me. I was diagnosed with liver cancer the same week I got my acceptance letter to Harvard. My parents and I didn't think it was a problem, but when we talked to our doctor, we found out there was an organ shortage, and livers were in short supply. They told me I'd have to be on a waiting list. Now, three months later, my name still hasn't come up, and that acceptance letter? Well, I guess my education is going to have to wait.

"And now the same people who lowered the age restriction on unwinding want to have a six-month waiting period once parents sign an unwind order, in case they change their minds. Six months? I won't be here in six months."

WAFFLING KILLS! VOTE NO ON PROP 53!

Paid for by Parents for a Positive Future

Waking up after being tranq'd is not a pleasant experience. With consciousness comes a splitting headache, a terrible taste in one's mouth, and the disturbing feeling that something has been stolen from you.

Miracolina awakes to the sound of someone crying beside her, begging for mercy. She recognizes the voice as Timothy's. He's definitely not the kind of boy built to handle something like this. She

can't see him, though, because her eyes are covered by a thick blindfold.

"It's all right, Timothy," she calls to him. "Whatever's going on, it's going to be okay." Hearing her voice makes his pleas and sobs settle into whimpers.

Miracolina shifts to feel the position of her body. She's sitting upright, and her neck aches from the position in which it had hung while she slept. Her hands are behind her back, tied together. Her legs are tied to the chair she sits in. Not painfully, but tight enough to ensure she won't break free.

"Okay," says the voice of a boy in front of them. "You can take off their blindfolds."

Her blindfold is pulled off, and although the light around her is not bright, it's still painful to keep her eyes open. She squints, slowly letting her eyes adjust and focus.

They're in some sort of grand, high-ceilinged ballroom. Crystal chandeliers, artwork on the walls—it looks like the kind of place where French royalty would have entertained high society before getting themselves beheaded. Except that this place is falling apart. There are holes in the ceiling through which pigeons freely fly in and out of the daylight. The paintings are peeling with weather damage, and the rank smell of mildew fills the air. There's no telling how far they've been taken from their destination.

"I'm really sorry we had to do it this way," the boy sitting in front of them says. He's not dressed like any sort of royalty. Even moldy royalty. He wears simple jeans and a light blue T-shirt. His hair is pale brown, almost blond, and too long—like he hasn't had a haircut in recent memory. He seems to be her age, but the tired look around his eyes makes him appear older, like he's seen many more things than anyone ought to see at their age. He also seems a little bit frail in some indefinable way.

"We couldn't risk you getting hurt, or figuring out where we were taking you. It was the only way to safely rescue you."

"Rescue us?" says Miracolina, speaking up for the first time. "Is that what you call this?"

"Well, it might not feel that way at the moment, but yes, that's exactly what we've done."

And all at once, Miracolina knows who this is. A wave of rage and nausea courses through her. Of all the unfair things to happen to her, why did she have to face *this*? Why did she have to be captured by *him*? She feels the kind of anger, the kind of hatred she knows is not good for her soul, especially this close to her tithing—but try as she might, she can't purge herself of the bitterness.

Then Timothy gasps, and his watery eyes go wide.

"You're him!" he says with the kind of enthusiasm boys like Timothy usually save for encounters with sports stars. "You're that tithe who became a clapper! You're Levi Calder!"

The boy across from them nods and smiles. "Yes, but my friends call me Lev."

OceanofPDF.com

3 · Cam

Wrists. Ankles. Neck. Strapped down. Itching. Itching all over. Can't move.

He flexes his hands and feet in the bonds. Side to side, up and down. It scratches the itch, but makes it burn.

"You're awake," says a voice that's familiar, and yet not. "Good. Very good."

He turns his neck. No one. Just white walls around him.

The scrape of a chair. Closer. Closer. The person who spoke comes into blurry view, moving her chair into his line of sight. Sitting. Legs crossed. Smiling, but not smiling. Not really.

"I was wondering when you'd wake up."

She wears dark pants and a blouse. Pattern of the blouse too blurry to make out. And the color. The color. He can't put a finger on the color.

"ROY-G-BIV," he says, searching. "Yellow. Blue. No." He grunts. His throat hurts when he speaks, and the words come out raspy. "Grass. Trees. Devil puke."

"Green," the woman says. "That's the word you're looking for, isn't it? My blouse is green."

Can the woman read minds? Maybe not. Maybe she's just clever. Her voice is gentle and refined. There's an accent to it. Slightly British, perhaps. It automatically makes him want to trust her.

"Do you recognize me?" she asks.

"No. Yes," he says, feeling his thoughts cinched in bonds tighter than the ones that secure him to the bed.

"Fair enough," says the woman. "This is all very new to you—you must be frightened."

Until that moment, it hasn't occurred to him that he should be frightened at all. But now that the crossed-legged, green-shirted woman says he must be, then he must be. He tugs against his bonds in

fear. The burning itch begins to hurt even more, and it brings forth a jagged shattering of memories that he must speak aloud.

"Hand on stove. Belt buckle—no, Mom, no! Falling from bike. Broken arm. Knife. He stabbed me with a knife!"

"Pain," says the cross-legged woman calmly. " 'Pain' is the word you're looking for."

It is a magic word, for it calms him down. "Pain," he repeats, hearing the word as it spills from strange vocal cords, and over unfamiliar lips. He stops struggling. The pain fades to burning, and the burning fades to an itch once more. But the thoughts that came along with the pain are still there. The burned hand; the angry mother; the broken arm; and a knife fight that he never fought, and yet somehow did. Somehow, all these things happened to him.

He looks again to the woman, who studies him coolly. Now that his focus is better, he can see the pattern of the blouse.

"Paste . . . palsy . . . hailey."

"Keep trying," says the woman. "It's in there somewhere."

His brain twitches. He struggles. Thinking feels like a race. A long, grueling Olympic race. What is that race called? It starts with an *M*.

"Paisley!" he says triumphantly. "Marathon! Paisley!"

"Yes, I imagine this is as exhausting as a marathon for you," says the woman, "but it was worth the effort." She touches the collar of her blouse. "You're right, it *does* have a paisley pattern!" She smiles, this time for real, and touches his forehead with her fingertip. He can feel the tip of her nail. "I told you it was in there."

Now that his thoughts are beginning to settle, he realizes that he does recognize the woman, but has no idea from where.

"Who?" he asks. "Who? Where? When?"

"How, what, and why," she adds with a smirk. "Your question words have all returned."

"Who?" he demands again, not appreciating the joke at his expense.

She sighs. "Who am I? You can say I'm your touchstone, your connection to the world—and in a sense your translator, because I can understand you, where few others can. I'm an expert in metalinguistics."

"Meta . . . meta."

"It's the nature of the language you speak. Metaphoric associations. But I can see I'm confusing you. It's not for you to worry about. My name is Roberta. But you wouldn't know that, because I never told you my name in all the times you've seen me."

"All the times?"

Roberta nods. "You can say you've only seen me once, yet you've also seen me many, many times. What do you think of that?"

It's a marathon again as he searches through his mind for the word he wants to say. "Gollum in the caves. Answer, or you can't cross the bridge. What's black and white and red all over?"

"Work for it," says Roberta. "I know you can do it."

"Riddle!" he says. "Yes, marathon but worth it! The word—riddle!"

"Very good." Roberta gently touches his hand. He takes a long look at her. She is older than him. He knows this, even though he has no idea how old he actually is. She's pretty, in a motherly sort of way. Blond hair with a hint of brown roots, and just a little makeup. Her eyes seem younger than the rest of her face. But that blouse . . .

"Medusa," he says. "Crone. Witch. Crooked, rotten teeth."

She stiffens a bit. "You think I'm ugly?"

"Uuuugly!" he says, savoring the word. "No, not you! Ugly green paisley ugly."

Roberta laughs, relieved, and glances down at her blouse. "Well, I guess there's no accounting for taste, is there?"

Accounting! Accountant! My father was an accountant! No—a policeman. No—a factory worker. No—lawyer, construction worker, pharmacist, dentist, unemployed, dead. His thoughts are all true, and all false. His own mind is a riddle that he can't hope to solve. He feels the fear that Roberta told him he must feel. It wells up again, and he begins to struggle once more against his bonds. They're not just bonds, though; some of them are bandages.

"Who?" he asks again.

"I already told you," Roberta says. "Don't you remember?"

"No! *Who?*" he asks. "*Who?*"

Roberta raises her eyebrows in understanding. "Oh. Who are *you*?"

He waits anxiously for an answer.

"Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Who *are* you?" She taps her fingertips on her chin, considering it. "The committee could not agree on a name. Of course, everyone has an opinion, the pompous buffoons. So, while they're dickering about it, perhaps you can choose one for yourself."

"Choose?" But why must he choose a name? Shouldn't he already have one? He runs a series of names through his mind: Matthew, Johnny, Eric, José, Chris, Alex, Spencer—and although some of them seem more likely than others, none of them hold the sense of identity that a true name should have. He shakes his head, trying to push something—*anything*—about himself into its proper place, but shaking his head only makes it hurt.

"Aspirin," he says. "Tylenol-aspirin, then count the sheep."

"Yes, I imagine you must still be tired. We'll up your pain medication, and I'll leave you to get some rest. We'll talk more tomorrow."

She pats his hand, then strides out of the room, turning off the light and leaving him alone with thought fragments that won't as much as shake hands with one another in the dark.

• • •

The next day—or at least he thinks it's the next day—he's not quite so tired, and his head doesn't hurt as much, but he's still just as confused. He now suspects that the white room that he took for a hospital room is not. There were enough hints in the architecture to suggest he was in some private residence that had been retrofitted for the convalescence of a single patient. There is a sound beyond the window that he can hear even when the window is closed. A constant rhythmic roar and hiss. Only after a day of hearing it does he realize what it is. Crashing waves. Wherever he is, it's on a seashore, and he longs to see the view. He asks and Roberta obliges. Today is the day he gets out of bed.

Two strong uniformed guards come in with Roberta. They undo his bonds and help him to his feet, holding him beneath his armpits.

"Don't be afraid," Roberta says. "I know you can do this."

The first moment of standing gives him vertigo. He looks to his bare feet, seeing only toes sticking out from beneath the pale blue hospital gown he wears. Those toes seem miles beneath him. He begins to walk, one labored step at a time.

"Good," says Roberta, walking along with him. "How does it feel?"

"Skydiving," he says.

"Hmm," says Roberta, considering this. "Do you mean dangerous or exhilarating?"

"Yes," he answers. In his mind he repeats both words, remembering them, pulling them from a massive box of unsorted adjectives and filing them in their proper place. There are so many unsorted words in the box, but bit by bit, it's all beginning to slide into coherent formation.

"It's all in there," Roberta has told him more than once. "It's just a matter of finding it."

The two guards continue to hold him beneath his armpits as he shuffles along. A knee buckles, and their grip grows tighter.

"Careful, sir."

The guards always call him "sir." It must mean that he commands respect, although he can't imagine why. He envies their ability to simply "be" without having to work at it.

Roberta leads them down a hallway that, like the distance to his feet, seems like miles, but is only a dozen yards or so. Up above, in the corner of the ceiling, there's a machine with a lens that zeroes in on him. There's a machine like that in his room, too, constantly watching him in silence. *Electric eye. Cyclops lens.* He knows the name for the device. It's on the tip of his tongue. "Say cheese!" he says. "It puts on ten pounds. Rolling . . . and . . . action! A Kodak moment."

"The word you're looking for starts with a *c*, and that's all the help I'll give you," Roberta says.

"Cuh—cuh—Cadaver. Cabana. Cavalry. Canada."

Roberta purses her lips. "You can do better."

He sighs and gives up before frustration can overwhelm him. Right now, it's hard to master walking, much less walking and thinking at the same time.

Now they come through a door to a place that is both inside and out.

"Balcony!" he says.

"Yes," Roberta tells him. "That one came easy."

Beyond the balcony is an endless sea, shimmering in the warm sun, and before him are two chairs and a small table. On the table are cookies and a white beverage in a crystal pitcher. He should know the name of that beverage.

"Comfort food," Roberta tells him. "Your reward for making the journey."

They sit facing each other with the food between them and the guards at the ready, should he need their help, or should he try to hurl himself off the balcony to the jagged rocks below. There are soldiers with dark, heavy weapons positioned strategically on those rocks—there for his protection, Roberta tells him. He imagines that should he hurl himself down to them, the guards on the rocks would also call him "sir."

Roberta pours the white liquid from its crystalline pitcher into crystalline glasses that catch the light, refracting it and splintering it in random projections on the stonework of the balcony.

He takes a bite of cookie. Chocolate chip. Suddenly the intensity of the flavor drags more memories out of hibernation. He thinks of his mother. Then another mother. School lunch. Burning his lip on a freshly baked Toll House. *I like them best chewy and hot. I like them best hard and almost burnt. I'm allergic to chocolate. Chocolate is my favorite.*

He knows all these things are true. How could they all be true? If he's allergic, how could he have so many wonderful chocolate memories?

"The marathon riddle continuing," he says.

Roberta smiles. "That was almost a complete sentence. Here, have something to drink."

She holds the glass of cold white liquid to him, and he takes it.

"Have you given any thought to your name?" Roberta asks, just as he takes a sip—and all at once, as the flavorful fluid dislodges a piece of soft cookie from the roof of his mouth, more thoughts fly in. The

combination of tastes forces a hundred thoughts through a sieve, leaving behind diamonds.

The electric eye machine. He knows what it's called! And the white stuff, it's from a cow, isn't it? Cow juice. Starts with an *M*. Electric eye. "Cam!" Cow juice. "Moo!"

Roberta looks at him strangely.

"Cam . . . Moo . . . ," he says again.

Her eyes sparkle, and she says, *"Camus?"*

"Cam. Moo."

"Camus! What a splendid name. You've outdone yourself."

"Camera!" he finally says. "Milk!" But Roberta isn't listening anymore. He has sent her to a more exotic place.

"Camus, the existential philosopher! 'Live to the point of tears.' Kudos to you, my friend! Kudos!"

He has no idea what she's talking about, but if it makes her happy, then it makes him happy. It feels good to know that he's impressed her.

"Your name shall be Camus Composite-Prime," she says with a grin on her face as wide as the shimmering sea. "Won't the committee just die!"

ADVERTISEMENT

Tired of all the fad diets? Painful hours at the gym with no results? We have the answer for you! Everyone knows a healthy heart is the key to feeling great, and with a new heart in peak condition, you'll actually want to exercise! Soon you'll see those pounds flying off and feel like a new you from the inside out! But don't take our word for it! Ask your doctor about nanosurgery!

Sponsored by the International Society of Nanosurgeons.
Results not guaranteed.

From then on, each of his days begins and ends with therapy. Painful stretching followed by guided exercises and weight lifting that seem specifically designed to cause him the greatest amount of pain.

"The healing agents can only do so much," says his physical therapist—a deep-voiced bodybuilder with the unlikely name of Kenny. "The rest has to come from you."

He is convinced this therapist enjoys watching him suffer.

Thanks to Roberta, those who don't just call him "sir" now call him Camus, but when he thinks of the name, all that comes to mind is a big black-and-white whale.

"That's *Shamu*," Roberta tells him over lunch. "You're *Camus*; it rhymes, but has a silent *S*."

"Cam," he tells her, not wanting to sound like a sea mammal. "Make it Cam."

Roberta raises an eyebrow, considering it. "We can do that. We can most certainly do that. I'll let everyone know. So how are your thoughts today, Cam? Feeling a bit more cohesive?"

Cam shrugs. "I have clouds in my head."

Roberta sighs. "Maybe so, but I can see your progress, even if you can't. Your thoughts are becoming a little clearer each day. You can string together longer strands of meaning, and you understand almost everything I say to you, don't you?"

Cam nods.

"Comprehension is the first step toward clear communication, Cam." Roberta hesitates for a second, then says, "*Comprends-tu maintenant*?"

"*Oui, parfaitement*," says Cam, not knowing that something was different about it until the words came out of his mouth. He realizes that yet another door of mystery has opened inside his head.

"Well," says Roberta, a mischievous smirk on her face, "for the time being, let's go one language at a time, shall we?"

New activities are added into his day. His afternoon naps are pushed back to make room for hour-long sessions sitting at a table-size computer desktop filled with digital images: a red vehicle, a building, a black-and-white portrait—dozens of pictures.

"Drag to you the images you recognize," says Roberta on the first day of this ritual, "and say the first word that each image brings to mind."

Cam feels overwhelmed. "Scantron?"

"No," Roberta tells him, "it's not a test, it's just a mental exercise to find out what you remember and what you still need to learn."

"Right," says Cam. "Scantron." Because her answer is the very definition of a test, isn't it?

He looks at the images and does as he's told, pulling the objects he recognizes closer. The portrait: "Lincoln." The building: "Eiffel." The red vehicle: "Truck fire. No. Fire truck." And on and on. As he pulls an image away, another sprouts to replace it. Some he has no problem identifying, others have no memories associated with them at all, and still others tug at the edge of his mind, but he can't find a word to attach to them. Finally, when he's done, he feels even more exhausted than he does after physical therapy.

"Basket," he says. "Crumpled paper basket."

Roberta smiles. "Wasted. You feel wasted."

"Wasted," Cam repeats, locking the word in his mind.

"I'm not surprised—none of this is easy, but you've done well, haven't you? And you are to be commended!"

Cam nods, more than ready for a nap. "Gold star for me."

• • •

Each day more and more is asked of him, both physically and mentally, but no explanation is given for any of it. "Your success is its own reward," Roberta tells him, but how can he relish any success if he has no context with which to measure it?

"The kitchen sink!" he tells Roberta at dinner one day. It's just the two of them. It's always just the two of them. "The kitchen sink! Now!"

She doesn't even have to probe to figure out what he means. "In time you'll know everything there is to know about yourself. Now is not that time."

"Yes, it is!"

"Cam, this conversation is over."

Cam feels the anger well in him and doesn't know what to do with it, and he can't put enough words together to take it away.

Instead it goes to his hands, and before he knows what he's doing, he's hurling a plate across the room, then another, then another. Roberta has to duck, and now the whole world is flying dishes and silverware and glass. In an instant the guards are on him, pulling him

back to his room, strapping him to the bed—something they haven't done for over a week.

He rages for what feels like forever, but then, exhausted, he calms down. Roberta comes in. She's bleeding. It's just a small cut above her left eye, but it doesn't matter how small it is. He did it. It was his fault.

Suddenly all his other emotions are overwhelmed by remorse, which he finds is even more powerful than anger.

"Broke my sister's piggy bank," he says in tears. "Crashed my father's car. Badness. Badness."

"I know you're sorry," Roberta says, sounding as tired as him. "I'm sorry too." She gently takes his hand.

"You'll be restrained until morning for your outburst," she tells him. "Your actions have consequences."

He nods, understanding. He wants to wipe away his tears, but he can't, for his hands are secured to the bed. Roberta does it for him. "Well, at least we know you're every bit as strong as we thought you'd be. They weren't kidding when they said you were a baseball pitcher."

Immediately Cam's mind scans his memory for the sport. Had he played it? His mind might be disjointed and fragmented, so finding what it contains is always difficult, but it's easy to know what memories don't exist at all.

"Never a pitcher," he says. "Never."

"Of course not," she says calmly. "I don't know what I was thinking."

• • •

Bit by bit and day by day, as more things fall into place in Cam's mind, he begins to realize his terrifying uniqueness. It is night now. His physical therapy has left him, for once, feeling more exhilarated than exhausted—but there was something Kenny the therapist had said. . . .

"You're strong, but your muscle groups don't work and play well with others."

Cam knew it was just an offhand joke, but there was a truth to it that stuck in Cam's craw, the way food often did. The way his throat didn't always agree to swallow what his tongue was pushing its way.

"Eventually your body will learn the alliances it has to make with itself," Kenny had said—as if Cam was a factory full of strike-prone workers, or worse, a clutch of slaves forced into unwanted labor.

That night Cam looks at the scars along his wrists, like hairline bracelets, visible now that the bandages have been removed. He looks down to the thick, ropy line stretching down the center of his chest, then forking left and right above his perfectly sculpted abs. Sculpted. Like a piece of marble hewn into human form—an artist's vision of perfection. This cliffside mansion, Cam now realizes, is nothing more than a gallery, and he is the work on display. Perhaps he should feel special, but all he feels is alone.

He reaches toward his face, which he has been told not to touch. That's when Roberta comes in. She knows he's been taking stock of his body, having spied on him through the camera lurking in the corner of the room. She is accompanied by two guards, for they can already tell Cam's emotions are starting to surge and threaten a tempest.

"What's wrong, Cam?" asks Roberta. "Tell me. Find the words."

His fingertips graze his face, which is filled with strange textures, but he's afraid to truly *feel* his face, for fear that in his anger he might tear it apart.

Find the words. . . .

"Alice!" he says. "Carol! Alice!" The words are wrong, he knows they're wrong, but they are the closest he can get to what he wants to say. All he can do is circle, circle, circle the point, lost in orbit around his own mind.

"Alice!" He points to the bathroom. "Carol!"

A guard grins knowingly, but knowing nothing. "Maybe he's remembering old girlfriends."

"Quiet!" snaps Roberta. "Go on, Cam."

He closes his eyes, forcing the thought to take shape, but the only form that comes is the ridiculous shape of—

"Walrus!" His thoughts are useless. Pointless. He despises himself.

But then Roberta says, ". . . and the Carpenter?"

He snaps his eyes to her. "Yes! Yes!" Somehow, as random as those two things are, they make perfect sense.

“ ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter,’ ” says Roberta, “an absurd poem that makes even less sense than you!”

He waits for her to connect at least some of the dots for him.

“It was written by Lewis Carroll. Who also wrote—”

“Alice!”

“Yes, he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Through the*—”

“*Looking Glass*!” Cam points to the bathroom. “*Through the Looking Glass*!” But he knows that’s not the word people use for it anymore. The modern word is—

“Mirror!” he shouts. “My face! In the mirror! My face!”

There is not a single mirror anywhere in the mansion, or at least in the rooms he’s allowed in. Not a single reflective surface anywhere. It could not be an accident. “Mirror!” he shouts triumphantly. “I want to look in a mirror. I want to look now! Show me!” It is the clearest statement and the highest level of communication he has yet to achieve. Surely Roberta will reward that!

“Show me now! *Ahora! Maintenant! Ima!*”

“Enough!” says Roberta, with calculated force in her voice. “Not today. You’re not ready!”

“No!” He touches his face with his fingers, this time hard enough that it begins to hurt. “It’s Dauger in the iron mask, not Narcissus at the pool! Seeing will lighten the load, not break the camel’s back!”

The guards look to Roberta, ready to leap in, to restrain him, to tie him once more to his bed, where he can’t hurt himself. But Roberta does not give the order. She hesitates. Considers. Then she finally says, “Come with me.” She turns and strides out of the room, leaving Cam and his guards to follow.

They leave the wing of the mansion that has been carefully designed for his protection, journeying to places that seem far less clinical. Rooms with warm wooden floors instead of cold linoleum. Framed artwork instead of bare white walls.

Roberta tells the guards to wait at the door, and she leads Cam into a living room. There are people present: Kenny, and some members of his therapy staff, as well as others whom Cam doesn’t know; professionals of some sort who work behind the scenes of his life.

When they see him, they rise from their leather chairs and sofas, alarmed by his presence.

"It's all right," Roberta tells them. "Give us a few minutes alone." They drop whatever they're doing and scurry out. Cam would ask Roberta who they are, but he already knows. They're like the guards at his door, and the guards on the rocks, and the man who cleans his messes, and the woman who rubs lotion on his scars. All these people are there to serve him.

Roberta leads him to a full-length mirror against a wall. He can see himself now head to toe. He sheds the hospital gown and stands there in his shorts, looking at himself. The shape of his body is beautiful; he is perfectly proportioned, muscular and trim. For a moment he thinks maybe he is Narcissus after all, absorbed in vanity—but as he steps closer and more into the light, he can see the scars. He knew they were there, but to see them all at once is overwhelming. They are ugly, and they're everywhere—but nowhere are they more pronounced than on his face.

That face is a nightmare.

Strips of flesh, all different shades, like a living quilt stretched across the bone, muscle and cartilage beneath. Even his head—clean-shaven when he awoke, but now filling in with peach-fuzz hair—has different colors and textures sprouting like uneven fields of clashing crops. His eyes ache from the sight of himself, and tears cloud them.

"Why?" is all he can think to say. He turns from his reflection, trying to disappear into his own shoulder, but Roberta gently touches that shoulder.

"Don't look away," she says. "Have the strength to see what I see."

He forces himself to look again, but all he can see are the scars.

"Monster!" he says. That word comes from so many different bits of memory, he needs no help finding it. "Frankenstein!"

"No," Roberta says sharply. "Never think that! That monster was made from dead flesh, but you are made of the living! That creature was a violation of all things natural, but you, Cam, you are a new world wonder!"

Now she looks into the mirror with him, pointing out his many miraculous parts. "Your legs belonged to a varsity runner," she tells

him, "and your heart to a boy who could have been an Olympic swimmer, had he not been unwound. Your arms and shoulders once belonged to the best baseball player any harvest camp had ever seen, and your hands? They played guitar with rare and glorious talent!" Then she smiles and catches his gaze in the mirror. "As for your eyes, they came from a boy who could melt a girl's heart with a single glance."

There is a certain pride in the way she speaks of him. It's a pride he cannot yet feel himself.

Roberta puts a finger to his temple. "But the best of it all is right in here!" She moves her finger around the multitextured fuzz of his hair, pointing out different spots on his cranium, like travel destinations on a globe.

"Your left frontal lobe holds the analytical and computational skills of seven kids who tested at the genius level in math and science. Your right frontal lobe combines the creative cores of almost a dozen poets, artists, and musicians. Your occipital lobe holds neuron bundles from countless Unwinds with photographic memories, and your language center is an international hub of nine languages, all waiting to be reawakened."

She touches his chin, turning him to face her. Her eyes, which seemed so far away in the mirror, are now only inches from his. They are hypnotic and overpowering.

"*Anata wa randamu de wa nai*, Cam," she says. "*Anata wa interijento ni sekkei sa rete imasu.*"

And Cam knows what she's saying. *You are not random, Cam. You are intelligently designed.* He has no idea what language it is, but he knows what it means, all the same.

"Every part of you was handpicked from the best and the brightest," Roberta tells him, "and I was there at each unwinding, so you would see me, hear me, and know me once all the parts were united." She takes a moment to think about it, and sadly shakes her head. "Those poor kids were too dysfunctional to know how to use the gifts they were given—but now, even divided, they can finally be complete through you!"

Now that she speaks of unwinding, fragments of memories flood him.

Yes, he had seen her!

Standing beside the operating table without as much as a surgical mask to cover her face, because the point, he now realizes, was for her to be seen and remembered. But it wasn't just one operating room, was it?

An identical memory
from dozens of different places in his mind.
But it's not his mind, is it?
It's their *minds.*
All of them.
Crying out.
Please, please make this stop,
until there is no voice to beg,
no mind to scream.
At that singular moment
When "I am" becomes "I'm not . . ."

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. Those final memories are a part of him now, spliced together, like the skin of his face. The memories are impossible to bear, and yet he bears them. Only now does he realize how strong he truly must be to hold the memory of a hundred unwindings without crumbling to nothing.

Roberta bids him to look around at the wealthy spoils of the cliffside mansion. "As you can see by your surroundings, we have very powerful backing to support you, so that you may continue to grow and prosper."

"Backing? From who?"

"It doesn't matter who. They're friends. Not just your friends, but friends of a world we all want to live in."

And though it is all beginning to come together, his whole life beginning to slide into place, one thing still plagues him.

"My face . . . it's horrible . . ."

"Not to worry," Roberta says. "The scars will heal—in fact, the healing agents are already taking effect. Soon those scars will vanish completely, leaving the faintest of lines where the grafts meet. Trust

me on this; I've seen the projection of what you will look like, Cam, and it is spectacular!"

He traces his fingers along the scars on his face. They are not as random as he had thought. They are symmetrical, the different skin tones forming a pattern. A design.

"It was a choice we made to give you a piece of every ethnicity. From the palest sienna-Caucasian, to the darkest umber tones of unspoiled Africa, and everything in between. Hispanic, Asian, Islander, Native, Australoid, Indian, Semitic—a glorious mosaic of humanity! You are everyman, Cam, and the truth of it is evident in your face. I promise you, when those scars heal, you will be the new definition of handsome! You will be a shining beacon, the greatest hope for the human race. You will show them that, Cam! By the mere virtue of your existence, you will show them!"

As he thinks of this, his heart accelerates, pounding powerfully in his chest. He imagines all the races this heart of his has won—and although he has no memory of being a star swimmer, his heart knows what his mind does not. It longs to be in the pool once more, just as his legs long for the track.

Right now, however, those legs buckle beneath him, and he finds himself on the ground, wondering how he got there.

"Too much stimulation for one day," Roberta says.

The guards, who have been watching from the door, race in and help him up.

"Are you all right, sir? Should we call for help, ma'am?"

"That won't be necessary. I'll tend to him."

They bring him to a plush sofa. He's shivering now, not just from the chill in the air, but from the revelation of knowing his own personal truth. Roberta grabs a throw blanket and covers him. She orders the room be made warmer, and she sits beside him like a mother comforting a feverish child.

"There are big plans for you, Cam. But you don't have to worry about that now. Right now, all you have to do is build that amazing potential; rope in all those parts of your mind that are still stray; teach every part of your body to work in concert. You are the conductor of a

living orchestra, and the music you're going to make will be beyond spectacular!"

"What if it's not?" he asks.

Roberta leans over, kissing him gently on the forehead. "Simply not an option."

ADVERTISEMENT

"When I lost my job, bills and debt began to pile up, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't think there was any way to provide for my family. I even thought about going to an offshore harvest facility and dividing myself on the black market to pay for my family's expenses, but the black market scared me. Well, at last there's a proposition on the ballot to legalize voluntary adult unwinding—something that would provide my family with money enough to survive. Imagine that! I could enter the divided state with peace of mind, knowing my family would be provided for—and by legalizing it, the black marketers will be put out of business. Vote yes on Prop 58! Help families like mine, and put an end to parts pirateering."

Paid for by the National Alliance of Donor Advocates

Cam's dreams are always lucid. He always knows that he's dreaming, and until now his dreams have been a source of intense frustration. They don't follow dream logic—they don't follow any logic—they are disjointed, disconnected, and confused. Snippets of randomness strung together by the cobweb of his unconscious mind. His dreams feel like channel surfing through mental stations so quickly, it's impossible to grasp the concept of any one thought-byte. Maddening! However, now that he knows the nature of his being, Cam finds that he's able to ride the wave.

Tonight he dreams he's in a mansion. Not the one overlooking the ocean, but one in the clouds. As he moves from room to room, it's not just the decor that changes, but the world as well—or rather, the life he's living within that world. In a kitchen, there are siblings he recognizes sitting at a table waiting for dinner. In a living room, a father asks him a question in a language that didn't make it into his brain, so he can't answer.

And then there are the hallways—long hallways with rooms on either side, containing people he knows but only slightly. These are

rooms he will never enter, and those people will never be more than images, trapped in those rooms. No further memory of them exists, or at least not within the cortical tissue he received.

In each room and hallway he moves through, Cam feels an intense surge of loss, but it's balanced by the anticipation of the many rooms ahead.

At the end of the dream, he finds a final door opening on a balcony with no railing. He stands at the edge, looking down into billowing clouds below, shredded and reformed by the forces of some sentient wind. Within him a hundred voices—the voices of those who are a part of him—all speak to him, but their many voices have blurred into an unintelligible rumble. Still, he knows what they're trying to tell him. *Jump, Cam, jump!* they're saying. *Jump, because we know you can fly!*

• • •

In the morning, still high from the dream, Cam pushes himself harder than he ever had before in physical therapy. He feels the burn in his muscles now rather than the strain on his healing wounds.

"You're at the top of your game today," Kenny tells him as he treats Cam's joints with a repeating cycle of ice and heat to speed the healing. Kenny, Cam has learned, was a top trainer for the NFL, but the powerful friends of whom Roberta spoke hired him to train a single client, offering him top dollar.

"Money talks," Kenny had to admit. "Besides, it's not every day you get to be part of history in the making."

Is that what I am? Cam thinks. *Future history?* He tries to imagine the name Camus Composite-Prime taught in future classrooms, but it doesn't stick. It's the name. It sounds too clinical, like the subject of an experiment rather than the result. He ought to shorten it. Camus ComPri. The images of race cars speeding around a bend soars through his mind. The Grand Prix. That's it! *Camus Comprix*. Silent S, silent *X*—a name that holds as many secrets as he!

He grimaces as Kenny ices his shoulder, but today, even that pain feels good.

"Pie-marathon, no more basket!" he says, then clears his throat and allows the thought to congeal, gathering the proper words. "This marathon I'm on . . . now it's as easy as pie. Not feeling wasted at all."

Kenny laughs. "Didn't I tell you it'd get easier?"

This afternoon Cam sits on the balcony with Roberta, and they're served lunch on silver trays. Each day the foods have greater variety, but they're always in small portions. Shrimp cocktail. Beet salad. Chicken curry with couscous. All delicious challenges to his taste buds, sparking micro-memories and forcing neural connections to accompany his acute senses of taste and smell.

"All a part of your healing," Roberta tells him as they eat. "All a part of your growth."

After lunch, they sit for their daily ritual before the digital tabletop, taking in images to stimulate his visual memory. The images are more complicated now. Nothing so easy as the Eiffel Tower or a fire truck. There are obscure works of art that Cam must identify—if not the actual work, then at least the artist. Scenes from plays.

"Who is the character?"

"Lady Macbeth."

"What is she doing?"

"I don't know."

"Then make something up. Use your imagination."

There are images of people in various walks of life, and Roberta asks Cam to imagine who they might be. What they might be thinking. Roberta doesn't allow him to speak until he has taken a moment to find the proper words.

"Man on a train. Wondering what's waiting at home for dinner. Probably chicken again. He's sick of chicken."

Then, amid the pictures strewn across the computer tabletop, Cam sees an image of a girl that catches his attention. Roberta follows his eyes to the image, and she immediately tries to wipe the image away, but Cam grabs her hand and stops her.

"No. Let me see."

Reluctantly Roberta takes her hand from the image. Cam drags it toward him, rotates it, and enlarges it. He can tell the picture was not

taken with the girl's permission. It's framed at an odd angle. Perhaps taken secretly. A memory flashes. This same girl. On a bus.

"That picture is not supposed to be here," Roberta says. "Can we move on now?"

"Not yet."

Cam can't quite tell where the picture was taken. It's outdoors. Dusty. The girl plays a piano under something dark and metallic that shades her. The girl is beautiful.

"Clipped wings. Broken heaven." Cam closes his eyes, remembering Roberta's order that he find the proper words before he speaks. "She's like . . . an angel damaged when she fell to earth. She plays music to heal herself, but nothing can heal her brokenness."

"Very nice," says Roberta unconvincingly. "On to the next one."

Roberta reaches over and tries to drag the picture away again, but Cam slides it to his corner of the table, out of her reach. "No. Stays here."

The fact that Roberta is bothered by this just makes Cam more curious. "Who is she?"

"Nobody important." But clearly from Roberta's reaction she is.

"I will meet her."

Roberta chuckles bitterly. "Very unlikely."

"We'll see."

They get on with their mental exercises, but Cam's mind stays on the girl. Someday he will find out who she is and meet her. He will learn everything he needs to know, or more accurately, unify and organize all the things that are already there in his fragmented brain. Once he does, he'll be able to speak to this girl with confidence—and then, in his own words, and in whatever language he needs to, he'll be able to ask her why she looks so sad, and what unfortunate twist of fate has left her in a wheelchair.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Two

Wholies

34 CHILDREN ABANDONED UNDER NEBRASKA'S SAFE-HAVEN LAW

by Nate Jenkins, The Associated Press
Friday, November 14, 2008

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) Nebraska officials geared up Friday for a special legislative session designed to deal with a unique "safe haven" law whose unintended consequences have allowed parents to abandon nearly three dozen children as old as 17.

As the session to correct the law approached, a 5-year-old boy was dropped off at an Omaha hospital on Thursday night. Earlier in the day, a woman dropped off two teenagers at another Omaha hospital, but one of them, a 17-year-old girl, fled. Authorities have not found her yet.

As of Friday afternoon, 34 children had been abandoned under the Nebraska law, five of them from other states.

Nebraska was the last state to enact a safe-haven law, intended to take in unwanted newborns. But unlike laws in other states, Nebraska's doesn't include an age limit.

Some observers have interpreted the current law as applying to children as old as 18.

The full article can be found at: http://articles.nydailynews.com/2008-11-14/news/17910664_1_safe-haven-law-omaha-hospital-unique-safe-haven-law

OceanofPDF.com

4 · Parents

They're together as they open the door. A father and mother, dressed for bed. Worry lines fill their foreheads as they see the nature of their visitors. This is an anticipated yet unexpected moment.

A Juvey-cop stands at the door with three plainclothes officers to back him up. The lead Juvey-cop is young. They all seem young. They recruit them earlier and earlier these days.

"We're here to process Unwind subject 53-990-24. Noah Falkowski." The parents glance at each other in alarm.

"You're a day early," the mother says.

"The schedule has been pushed up," the lead cop tells her. "We have the contractual right to change the pickup date. Can we please have access to the subject?"

The father takes a step forward to look at the name on the officer's uniform.

"Look here, Officer Mullard," he says in a loud whisper, "we're not prepared to surrender our son just yet. As my wife has told you, we were expecting you tomorrow. You'll have to come back then."

But E. Robert Mullard waits for no one. He barges into the house, with his team following behind him.

"Good God!" the father says. "Have some decency."

Mullard lets out a guffaw. "Decency? What do you know about decency?" Then he looks down the bedroom hallway. "Noah Falkowski!" he calls loudly. "If you're back there, come out now."

A fifteen-year-old boy peeks out of a bedroom doorway, takes one look at the guests, and slams his door. Mullard signals to the brawniest of his cohorts. "He's all yours."

"I'm on it."

"Stop him, Walter!" the woman begs her husband. Walter, put on the spot, turns to Mullard with a vengeance. "I want to talk to your superior."

And then Mullard pulls out a gun. “You’re in no position to make demands.”

It’s clearly just a tranq pistol, but considering that nasty business about the Juvey-cop killed with his own gun, Walter and his wife aren’t about to take any chances.

“Sit down,” Mullard says, nodding toward the dining room. The couple hesitates. “I said sit down!” And then two of Mullard’s team force them to sit in two dining room chairs. The father, a reasonable man, assumes he’s dealing with another reasonable young professional like himself.

“Is this all really necessary, Officer Mullard?” he asks, in a calmer, more accommodating tone.

“My name isn’t Mullard, and I’m not a Juvey-cop.” Suddenly it hits the man how obvious this is. He knew this kid was too young to have that kind of authority. The scars on his face made him seem a little . . . well . . . *seasoned*, but still he was too young. How could Walter have been so easily fooled? And isn’t there something familiar about this young man’s face? Has he seen him before, possibly in the news? The man is rendered speechless by this unexpected turn of nonprofessional events.

OceanofPDF.com

5 · Connor

The best part of these missions is the look on the parents' faces when they realize that the tables have been turned. How their eyes dart down toward the tranq gun aimed at them, suddenly realizing that their unwind order is now nothing but a piece of paper.

"Who are you?" asks the father. "What is it you want?"

"We want what you no longer want," Connor tells him. "We want your son." Then Trace, the muscular team member he sent after Noah, comes out of the bedroom holding the struggling kid.

"They don't make bedroom locks like they used to," Trace says.

"Lemme go," shouts the kid. "Lemme go!" Connor goes to him while Hayden, also on the rescue team, pulls a tranq gun to make sure the couple doesn't get any ideas.

"Noah, your parents were about to unwind you," Connor tells him. "In fact, the Juvies are coming tomorrow—but luckily for you, we came first."

There's a horrified look on the kid's face. He shakes his head, denying the possibility. "You're lying!" Then he looks to his parents, not so sure anymore. "He's lying, right?"

Connor doesn't let the parents answer. "The truth—you owe him that much."

"You have no right to do this!" the mother yells.

"The truth!" demands Connor.

Then the father sighs, and says, "Yes, what he says is true. I'm sorry, Noah."

Now Noah casts a furious gaze at his parents, and then turns to Connor. Connor can see tears building behind his fury.

"Are you going to hurt them?" Noah asks.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Connor shakes his head. "Sorry, that's not what we do. Someday you'll be grateful we didn't."

Noah looks down. “No, I won’t.”

Trace, no longer having to hold Noah quite so tightly, escorts him back to his bedroom so Noah can shove a few things into his backpack; what little he can salvage from fifteen years of life.

While the rest of Connor’s team checks out the home, making sure there is no one else present to call the police or otherwise foul up the mission, Connor hands a pad and pen to the father.

“What’s this for?”

“You’re going to write down the reasons you decided to have your son unwound.”

“What’s the point?”

“We know you have reasons for doing it,” Connor says. “I’m sure they’re stupid; I’m sure they’re selfish and seriously screwed up, but they’re still reasons. If nothing else, it’ll help us to know what kind of pain in the ass Noah is, so maybe we can deal with him better than you did.”

“You keep saying we,” the mother asks. “Who’s we?”

“We’re the ones saving your son’s freaking life. That’s all you need to know.”

The father looks down pitifully at the little notepad.

“Write,” Connor says. Neither he nor the mother look up as Trace escorts Noah out of the house into the waiting car.

“I hate you!” he yells back at them. “I never meant it when I said it before, but now I do.”

Connor can tell it cuts deeply into these parents, but not as deeply as the scalpels of a Chop Shop.

“Someday, if he makes it to seventeen, he may give you a shot at forgiveness. If he does, don’t throw that chance away.”

They say nothing to that. The father just looks down at the pad, scribbling and scribbling. When he’s done, he hands it back to Connor. Rather than a manifesto, the man has written down his excuses in efficient bullet points. Connor reads them out loud, as if each one was an accusation against them.

“ ‘Disrespect and disobedience.’ ”

Those are always the first reasons. If every parent unwound a kid due to disrespect, the human race would go extinct in a single

generation.

" 'Destructive behavior to self and property.' "

Connor knows a bit about self-destructive behavior and did his share of vandalizing in times of frustration. But most kids get over that, don't they? It never ceases to amaze him how everything—even unwinding—is geared toward the quick fix. Connor looks at the third bullet point and has to laugh.

" 'Lack of personal hygiene'?"

The woman throws her husband an angry gaze for writing that.

"Ooh, I like this one!" Connor says. " 'Diminished prospects for future.' Sounds like a stock report!"

At every rescue mission, Connor reads aloud the reasons, and each time he wonders if it's the same list his parents would have written. This time, the last reason chokes Connor up a bit.

" 'Our own failure as parents.' "

And then he gets mad at himself. These parents haven't earned his sympathy. If it's *their* failure, then why should their son have to pay for it?

"Tomorrow, when the Juvey-rounders come for him, you'll tell them that he ran away, and you don't know where he went. You won't talk about us, or what happened here today, because if you do, we'll know. We monitor all the police frequencies."

"And if we don't comply?" the father asks, showing the same kind of disobedience he condemned his son for.

"In case you have any thought of reporting this, we've uploaded a nice identity cocktail for the two of you onto the net."

That makes them both look even more ill than they already do.

"What kind of cocktail?"

Hayden's the one who answers, proud because it was his idea.

"We send out a single code over the net, and bingo, your names become linked to a dozen known clapper cells. Your digital footprint will be so tangled in terrorism, you'll spend years trying to get Homeland Security off your collective asses."

The couple nod a solemn acceptance.

"Fine," the man says. "You have our word."

The threat of identity cocktails is always very effective—and besides, whether these kids go with Connor or they're unwound, the parents get what they want. Their unmanageable kid becomes somebody else's problem. Reporting Connor and his team would just make Noah their problem again.

"You have to understand, we were desperate," says the mother with a high quotient of self-righteousness. "Everyone told us that unwinding was the best thing to do. Everyone."

Connor tears up the list of excuses and drops it on the floor, locking eyes with her.

"So, in other words you decided to unwind your son because of peer pressure?"

Finally the two of them crumble, feeling the appropriate weight of shame. The father, who had started out so defiant, suddenly bursts into tears. It's the mother who holds it together enough to offer Connor one last excuse.

"We tried to be good parents . . . but there's a point at which you give up trying."

"No, there's not," Connor tells her. Then he turns to go, leaving them with the worst punishment of all: having to live with themselves.

Connor and his team drive off in an intentionally nondescript minivan with a false license plate. Noah Falkowski is understandably grim as he looks out the window, watching his neighborhood go by for the last time. He doesn't seem to know who they are. He doesn't seem to care. Connor's glad Noah doesn't recognize him. While the Akron AWOL has a legendary reputation in some circles, his face was in the news much less than Lev's. Plus, with everyone thinking he's dead, it's easier to go incognito.

"Relax," Connor tells him, "you're among friends."

"I got no friends," says Noah. And for now, Connor lets him feel sorry for himself.

• • •

The Graveyard is true to its name this late at night. Airplane tail fins stand as monumental and as quiet as tombstones. Kids are on watch

patrol with tranq-loaded rifles, but other than that, there's no sign that the place is home to more than seven hundred AWOL Unwinds.

"So why are we here?" Noah asks as the rescue party pulls down the main aisle—the busiest "street" of the Graveyard, flanked by a series of large aircraft that make up the core of their living space, each one named by Unwinds who have long since left. Names like Crash Mamma, for one of the main girls' dorms; the ComBom, a veteran World War II bomber that's become their computer and communications center; and of course IHOP, the International House of Purgatory, where new arrivals like Noah stay until they're given a job and integrated into the Graveyard.

"The Graveyard's where you'll live until you turn seventeen," Connor tells Noah.

"Like hell I will," the kid says. Typical. Connor just ignores him.

"Hayden, get him a bedroll and escort him to *IHOP*. We'll see what kind of work he's suited for in the morning."

"So what am I, a stinking AWOL now?" asks Noah.

"AWOLs is what *they* call us," says Hayden. "We call ourselves Whollies. As to whether or not you stink, I think we all can agree that you need to visit our bathing facilities at your earliest possible convenience."

The kid grunts like a mildly irritated bull, and Connor grins. It was Hayden who actually came up with the term "Whollies," because "Unwind" and "AWOL" were negative labels put on them by the world. "You should be a spin doctor," Connor told Hayden, to which he facetiously replied, "Spinning makes me nauseous; I'd puke on my patients."

Hayden, Connor, and Risa were the only three Whollies remaining who had been harbored in Sonia's safe house way back when. That experience bonded them as if they were lifelong friends.

Noah toddles off with Hayden to the International House of Purgatory, and Connor takes a few moments to enjoy some rare peace and quiet. He looks to AcMac, the jet where Risa sleeps. The lights are out, just like the others, but he suspects she has already peered out at the sound of their approach, to make sure that Connor has arrived home safe and sound.

“I’m not sure if these missions of yours are noble or stupid,” Risa once told him.

“Why can’t they be both?” he responded. The fact is, saving individual kids is somehow far more satisfying for him than the daily ins and outs of running the Graveyard. These side trips keep him sane.

When he was left in charge, it was only supposed to be temporary. The Anti-Divisional Resistance was supposed to find a suitable replacement for the Admiral—someone who could present an image that the public could believe would be running an airplane salvage operation. But then they realized that they didn’t need that. They had people in the Graveyard’s front office—a trailer near the entrance—and those employees ran the business end of things. As long as Connor kept the kids working, fed, and quiet, the ADR found no reason to hire someone else.

“Surveying your domain?”

Connor turns to see Trace coming up to him.

“It’s not mine, I only work here,” Connor tells him. “The new kid settled in?”

“Yeah—a real complainer. He says the blanket’s too rough.”

“He’ll get over it. We all do.”

Trace Neuhauser is an air force boeuf who gave it up to join the resistance when his sister was unwound. He’s AWOL from his unit for six months now, but still a boeuf in every sense of the word. He’s all steroid bulk, with a tunnel-vision education in the martial sciences.

Connor never liked boeufs. Maybe because they know their purpose in the world, and generally serve it well. Seeing them always made Connor feel useless. That a boeuf has become such a close friend proves that people change. Trace is twenty-three but seems to have no problem taking orders from a seventeen-year-old.

“Chain of command knows no age restrictions,” he once told Connor. “You could be six, but if you were my superior, I’d still do as I was told.”

Maybe that’s why Connor likes him; because if a guy like that can respect Connor’s lead, maybe he’s not such a lousy leader after all.

• • •

The next day begins as every day begins in the Graveyard. With things to be done. "The Firefighters' Treadmill," the Admiral called it: an endless trot to stomp out nuisances. "Leadership is about keeping toilets flushing," the Admiral once said. "Unless you're on the battlefront. Then it's about staying alive. Neither are pleasant."

On the main aisle, kids are already lounging beneath the recreation jet, watching TV, or playing video games. Still more have begun their shifts, dismantling or rebuilding aircraft parts, as per the orders coming in from the front office. Sometimes it's easier for Connor to think that it's all going on in spite of him, rather than because of him.

As soon as Connor is spotted on the main aisle, the barrage begins.

"Hey, Connor," says a kid running up to him, "not to complain, but, like, can we get some better food here? I mean, I know beggars can't be choosers and all, but if I gotta eat beef-flavored stew with no actual beef in it one more time, I think I'm gonna hurl."

"Yeah, you and everyone else," Connor tells him.

"Mr. Akron," says a girl, fourteen or so—he can't get over the fact that so many of the kids, particularly the younger ones, are not only ridiculously respectful, but think that Akron is somehow part of his name—"I don't know if you know this, but the fans in Crash Mama ain't working no more, and it's way too hot at night."

"I'll send someone to fix them," Connor tells her. Then a third kid comes up complaining that there's too much trash, and can't he do something about it.

"I swear, half the time I feel like a janitor," he tells Trace. "I need a dozen more hands just to keep this place afloat."

"You do have a dozen hands," Trace reminds him. "But you've got to be willing to use them."

"Yeah, yeah," says Connor, having heard it before. He shouldn't be mad at Trace for pointing these things out—after all, that's why he keeps Trace so close: to advise him on how to be in charge. Connor has already accepted the odd reality that he's some sort of leader, but, as the Admiral pointed out, it's a pretty thankless job.

After the Admiral left him in charge, Connor had set up a power structure: an inner circle, an outer circle, and everyone else. Those in his inner circle are supposed to make sure things like food supplies

and sanitation are being taken care of, because Connor has much more pressing things to deal with. Things like keeping them all in one piece.

"I'll call a meeting after I meet with the rep from the resistance," Connor tells Trace. "And I'll make sure tasks are being delegated."

"Maybe," says Trace, "you need to take a look at who you're delegating to."

Connor never knew he could handle this kind of responsibility, but now that he knows, he wishes he could go back to just being responsible for himself. There are so many things he feels he still needs to do. Thanks to Lev, and his misguided clapper cell, Connor avoided being unwound, but he still doesn't feel entirely whole.

OceanofPDF.com

6 · Risa

There is only one permanently disabled resident of the Graveyard. Since the disabled are a protected class, they're never at risk for being unwound, so they never turn up at the Graveyard with all the other kids who ran from their unwind order. It's a testimony to the swiss-cheese nature of public compassion. Lucky for those to whom grace is extended, but unlucky for those who wind up in the holes.

Risa is disabled by choice. That is to say, she refused surgery that would repair her severed spine, because it involved giving her the spine of an unwound kid. It used to be that spinal damage was irreversible, and if that was the card you were dealt, you spent the rest of your days with it. She wonders if it's harder to live like that, or to live knowing you can be fixed but choose not to.

Now she lives in an old McDonnel Douglas MD-11, for which they built a wooden switchback ramp to the main hatch. The plane has been aptly named Accessible Mac, or AcMac for short. There are about ten kids with sprained ankles or other temporary conditions who currently share AcMac with Risa, each in sections divided by curtains, providing the illusion of personal space. Risa has the old first-class cabin of the jet, which is forward of the hatch. It gives her a larger living area, but she can't stand the fact that it singles her out. The whole lousy jet singles her out—and although her shattered spine is a well-earned war wound, it doesn't change the fact that she is constantly condemned to receive special treatment.

The only other plane with a ramp is the infirmary jet, where she works. It leaves Risa with a very limited choice of interior spaces, so she spends her free time outside when she can stand the heat.

Every day at five o'clock, Risa waits for Connor beneath a stealth bomber they've nicknamed Hush Puppy. Every day, Connor is late.

The bomber's expansive black wings create a huge wedge of shade, and its radar-resistant skin wicks heat right out of the air. It's one of the coolest spots in the Graveyard, in more ways than one.

She finally sees him approaching: a figure in blue camo that sets him apart from anyone else in the Graveyard. "I thought you weren't coming," Risa says as he reaches the shade of Hush Puppy.

"I was supervising an engine dismantling."

"Yeah," says Risa with a grin. "That's what they all say."

Connor brings his tension with him to these daily encounters with her. He says being with her is the only time he gets to feel normal, but he never truly relaxes. In fact, since she first met him, she's never known him to relax. It doesn't help to know that their legends are out there, living lives of their own. Stories of Connor and Risa have already grown deep roots in modern folklore, for few things are more compelling than an outlaw romance. They are Bonnie and Clyde for a new era; the subjects of bumper stickers and T-shirts.

Hard to imagine that so much notoriety came from merely surviving the blast at Happy Jack Harvest Camp. Merely because Connor was lucky enough to be the first Unwind ever to walk out of a Chop Shop in one piece. Of course, as far as the rest of the world knows, Connor died there and Risa is missing—either dead herself, or in hiding deep within some AWOL-friendly nation, if there even is such a thing anymore. She wonders how her legend would hold up if people knew she was right here in the Arizona desert, sunburned and dirty.

A breeze blows beneath Hush Puppy's belly, getting even more dirt in Risa's eyes. She blinks it away.

"Are you ready?" Connor asks her.

"Always."

Then Connor kneels before Risa's wheelchair and begins to massage her legs, trying to coax circulation to those parts of her that can no longer feel. It's part of their daily ritual together, this physical contact between them. It's coolly clinical, yet strangely intimate at the same time. Today, however, Connor is detached. Distant.

"Something's bothering you even more than usual," Risa says. A statement of fact, not a question. "Go on, spill it."

Connor sighs, looks up at her, and asks the big question.

"Why are we here, Risa?"

She considers the question. "Do you mean why are we here philosophically, as a species, or why are we here, doing this in full view

of anyone who cares to watch?"

"Let them watch," he says. "I don't care." And clearly he doesn't, because privacy is the first casualty when you live in the Graveyard. Even the small private jet Connor claimed as his quarters has no curtains on its windows. No, Risa knows that this has nothing do with their daily ritual, or the grand question of humanity. It has to do with survival.

"What I mean is, why are we still here in the Graveyard? Why haven't the Juvies tranq'd and yanked us all?"

"You've said it yourself—they don't see us as a threat."

"But they should," Connor points out. "They're not stupid . . . which means that there's some other reason why they haven't taken this place down."

Risa reaches over, rubbing Connor's tense shoulder. "You think too much."

Connor smiles at that. "When you met me, you accused me of not thinking enough."

"Well, your brain is making up for lost time."

"After what we've been through—after what we've seen—can you blame me?"

"I like you better as a man of action."

"Action has to be well thought out. You taught me that."

Risa sighs. "Yes, I suppose I did. And I created a monster."

She realizes that both of them have been profoundly changed in the wake of the Happy Jack Harvest Camp revolt. Risa likes to think that their spirits have been galvanized like iron in a furnace, but sometimes it feels like they've only been damaged by those harsh flames. Still, she's glad she had survived to see the far-reaching effects of that day. Like Cap-17.

Even before Happy Jack, there had been a bill in Congress calling for the lowering of the legal limit of unwinding by a whole year, to one's seventeenth birthday instead of eighteenth. The "Cap-17" bill had never been expected to pass—in fact, most people didn't even know about it until Happy Jack made the news—and until poor Lev Calder's face became plastered on the cover of every major magazine: the innocent boy clothed all in white. A bright-eyed, clean-cut kid

smiling out from a school picture. How the perfect child became a clapper was a question that made parents everywhere stop and take notice . . . because if it could happen to Lev, who's to say that their own child might not turn their blood explosive someday and detonate themselves in a burst of rage? And the fact that Lev chose *not* to detonate himself troubled people even more, because they couldn't just file him away as a bad seed. They had to accept that he had a soul —a conscience—which meant that maybe society had a hand in making him a clapper. And then suddenly—as if to assuage everyone's feelings of cultural guilt—the Cap-17 bill became law. No one could be unwound after their seventeenth birthday.

"You're thinking about Lev again, aren't you?" Connor asks.

"How do you know?"

"Because whenever you do, time stops, and your eyes go to the dark side of the moon."

She reaches down to touch his hands, which have stopped massaging, and he gets back to coaxing her troubled circulation.

"It's because of him that the Cap-17 law passed, you know," Risa says. "I wonder how he feels about that."

"I'll bet it gives him nightmares."

"Or," suggests Risa, "maybe he sees the bright side of it."

"Do you?" Connor asks.

Risa sighs. "Sometimes."

Cap-17 should have been a good thing, but in time, it became clear that it was not. Sure it was a victorious morning that next day, when the news showed thousands of seventeen-year-olds being released from harvest camps. It was a triumph of human compassion, and a great victory for those against unwinding, but that same feeling of victory allowed people to turn a blind eye again to the whole problem. Unwinding was still there, but people could now look the other way, believing their consciences were clean.

And then came the media blitz, a flood of advertisements designed to "remind" people how much "better" things were since the Unwind Accord. "Unwinding: the natural solution," the ads said, or "Troubled teen? Love them enough to let them go," and, of course, Risa's

favorite, “Experience a world outside of yourself: Embrace the divided state.”

The sad truth about humanity, Risa was quick to realize, is that people believe what they’re told. Maybe not the first time, but by the hundredth time, the craziest of ideas just becomes a given.

Which brings her back to Connor’s question. With a major shortage of Unwinds in the system after Cap-17, and a public accustomed to getting all the parts they want whenever they want them, why hasn’t the Graveyard been raided? Why are they still here?

“We’re here,” Risa tells him, “because we are. And we should just be thankful for that while it lasts.” Then she gently touches his shoulder, signaling it’s time to end the massage. “I’d better get back to the infirmary jet. I’m sure there are plenty of scrapes, black eyes, and fevers to take care of. Thank you, Connor.” As many times as he does this for her, she’s always embarrassed that she needs it.

He rolls down the loose-fitting legs of her khaki pants and puts her feet back on the wheelchair’s footrests. “Never thank a guy for putting his hands all over you.”

“Not all over,” Risa says coyly.

Connor throws her a sly little grin, letting it carry the weight of anything he might have said to that.

“I think I’d like our times together even more,” she tells him, “if you were actually here.”

Connor reaches up to touch her face—but he stops himself, switches hands, and touches her with the left instead of the right. The one he was born with. “I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“—your brain making up for lost time. I know. But I do look forward to a day we can be together and not be filled with all these dark thoughts. Then we’ll know we’ve won.”

Then she pushes off toward the infirmary jet, maneuvering over the rugged ground on her own, as always, refusing to be pushed by anyone, ever.

OceanofPDF.com

7 · Connor

A representative from the Anti-Divisional Resistance shows up the next afternoon—three days late for his scheduled meeting with Connor. He's disheveled, paunchy, and drenched in sweat.

"And it's not even summer," Connor says—hoping to make the point that the sweltering Arizona summer is just a few months away. The ADR had better get their act together, or there are going to be a lot of angry AWOLs. That is, the ones who survive the heat.

They meet in the retired Air Force One, which used to be the Admiral's personal quarters but now serves only as a conference room. The man introduces himself as Joe Rincon, "But call me Joe. No formalities in the ADR." He sits at the conference table and pulls out a pad and pen to take notes. He's already glancing at his watch, as if there's somewhere else he would rather be.

Connor has a whole list of gripes from every corner of the Graveyard. Why are the food shipments so few and far between? Where are the medical supplies they requested? How about air conditioner and generator parts? Why are they not being warned when planes show up with new arrivals—and for that matter, why are the numbers coming in so light? Five or ten at a time, when the planes used to come in with fifty or more. With food supply being a constant issue, Connor doesn't mind the low numbers, but it troubles him. If fewer AWOLs are being found by the resistance, that means the Juvies—or worse, the so-called parts pirates—must be finding them first.

"What's wrong with you people? Why does the ADR keep ignoring all our requests?"

"There's really nothing to worry about," Rincon says, which sends up a red flag for Connor, because he never said anything about being worried. "Things are still being reorganized."

"Still? No one ever told us things were being reorganized at all. And what do you mean by reorganized?"

Rincon blots his sweaty forehead with his shirtsleeve. “Really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Over the course of a year, Connor has come to understand the Anti-Divisional Resistance better than he wanted to. When he was just an AWOL, he had no choice but to trust that the ADR was a well-oiled rescue machine—but it was nothing of the sort. The only thing that ran smoothly was the Graveyard—the Admiral had made sure of that, and Connor, following in his footsteps, keeps it that way.

He should have realized things with the ADR were not as they appeared as soon as they accepted the Admiral’s suggestion that Connor be the one to run the place, rather than installing a more experienced adult. If they were so willing to let a teenager manage their AWOL sanctuary, something was wrong somewhere.

There was a crazy time when kids were coming in every few days. The Graveyard boasted more than two thousand kids, and the ADR sent shipments of everything they needed on a regular basis. Then, when Cap-17 passed, Connor was ordered to immediately release all the seventeen-year-olds—who were a large percentage of the Graveyard population—but he made a command judgment to do it slowly, releasing them in increments, so they didn’t flood the city of Tucson with more than nine hundred homeless teenagers. The fact that they wanted him to just let all those kids go at once should have been another sign that the ADR leadership was faltering.

Connor had released them over a period of two months, but the ADR cut their supplies immediately, as if those kids had suddenly ceased to be their problem. Between the released seventeen-year-olds, kids sent out on work programs that had been set in place by the Admiral, and kids who deserted when there wasn’t enough food, the Graveyard population had dropped to about seven hundred.

“I see you’ve planted yourself quite a garden—and you’re raising chickens as well, yes?” Rincon says. “You must be fully sustainable by now.”

“Not even close. The Green Aisle produces only about one-third of the food that we need, and with the ADR flaking on our food shipments, we’ve had to resort to raiding market delivery trucks in Tucson.”

"Oh dear," says Rincon. That's all, just "Oh dear," and he starts to gnaw on the end of his pen.

Connor, whose patience has been frayed since day one, is tired of beating around the bush. "Are you going to tell me something useful, or are you just here to waste my time?"

Rincon sighs. "It comes down to this, Connor: We believe the Graveyard has been compromised."

Connor cannot believe what this fool is telling him. "Of course it's been compromised! I'm the one who told you it was compromised! The Juvies know about us, and since the day I took over, I've been saying we need to relocate!"

"Yes, we're working on that, but in the meantime we can't keep pouring valuable resources into a facility that could be taken out by the Juvies at any moment."

"So you're just going to let us rot here?"

"I didn't say that. You seem to have everything under control. With any luck, the Juvies will never find a need to invade—"

"With any luck?" Connor stands and storms from the table. "The resistance should be about action, not luck. But do you take action? No! I send you my plans to infiltrate harvest camps, and ideas on how to free kids in nonviolent ways that won't piss people off and create a backlash—but all I hear from the ADR is 'we're working on it, Connor,' or 'we'll take it under advisement, Connor.' And now you're telling me to rely on luck for our survival? What the hell is the ADR good for?"

Rincon takes this as his cue to end the meeting—something he's clearly wanted to do since the moment he arrived. "Hey, I'm just the messenger—don't take this out on me!"

But there are some things Connor simply cannot help, and he finds himself swinging Roland's fist at "Call-Me-Joe" Rincon's face. The punch connects with the man's eye, and he stumbles backward into the bulkhead. He looks at Connor not with contempt, but with fear, as if Connor might not stop there. So much for nonviolence. Connor backs off.

"There's my message," he says. "Please take it back to the people who sent you."

• • •

There's a wingless Boeing 747 airliner that has been gutted, like just about every other plane in the Graveyard, and retrofitted with gym equipment. It's been named GymBo, although some call it "the fight deck" since so many brawls seem to break out there.

This is where Connor goes to get out his frustrations.

A big punching bag before him, he pounds it like a prize-fighter hell-bent on a first-round knockout. He imagines the faces of all the kids who pissed him off that day. All the ones who have excuses for not doing what they're supposed to do. And he spreads his anger further to people like Rincon, and the Juvey-cops that he's had to face, to the smiling counselors at the harvest camp who tried to make unwinding seem like a wholesome family-friendly activity, and finally to the faces of his parents, who set in motion the clockwork that landed him here. For them he can't hit that bag hard enough and yet can't stomach the guilt he feels for feeling that way.

The punches from his left hand are nothing compared to those from his right. He looks at the shark tattoo staring at him from the forearm; that tiger shark even uglier than the real thing. He has to admit to himself that he's gotten used to it, but he'll never like it. The color of the hair that grows on that arm is also thicker and darker than that of his other arm. *He's here,* Connor tells himself. *Roland is here with every punch I throw with his hand.* And the worst part about it is that throwing those punches feels good—as if the arm itself is enjoying it.

He moves toward a bench press, and a couple of kids who had been sharing it make way for him—a perk of being in charge. He looks at the weight, adds another five pounds on either side, then leans back, ready to pump. Every day he does this, and every day this is the part he hates the most . . . because nowhere is the difference between his left arm and his right clearer than on the bench press. The arm he was born with struggles to raise that bar. And suddenly he realizes that even now he's still fighting Roland.

"Need someone to spot you?" says a kid behind him. Connor tilts his neck to see standing above him the kid everyone just calls Starkey.

"Yeah, sure," says Connor. "Thanks." He goes for another set, already feeling his natural arm aching but not wanting to give into it . . . but after seven reps it starts to give out, and Starkey has to help him get the barbell back onto the cradle.

Starkey points at the shark on his right arm. "You get that after Happy Jack?"

Connor sits up, nursing the burn in his muscles, and looks at the tattoo. "It came with the arm."

"Actually," says Starkey, "I was talking about the arm. The way I figure it, if the guy who's so against unwinding has an Unwind's arm, it probably wasn't by choice. I'd love to hear how it happened."

Connor laughs, because no one's ever asked the question so blatantly. It's actually a relief to talk about it.

"There was this kid—a real tough guy. He tried to kill me once but couldn't go through with it. Anyway, he was the last kid unwound at Happy Jack. I was supposed to be next, but that's when the clappers blew up the Chop Shop. I lost my arm and woke up with this one. Trust me, it wasn't my choice."

Starkey takes in the story and nods, not offering any judgment.

"Badge of honor, man," he says. "Wear it out loud."

Connor tries to get to know every kid who arrives, at least a little bit, so they don't feel like just a number waiting to be caught and unwound. So what does he know about Starkey? He's got personality, and a smile that's a little hard to read. He's got wavy red hair that didn't start that way, as evidenced by dark roots that have grown almost an inch since he arrived a month ago. He's a little short, solid, not scrawny. Stocky, that's the word—like a wrestler—and yet he has a confidence that makes him seem taller. There are also rumors that he killed a Juvey-cop or two while escaping, but they're only rumors.

Connor remembers the day Starkey arrived. Every group of new arrivals has at least one kid who thinks blowing up harvest camps is a good idea. Actually, most of them probably think that, but most kids are too intimidated upon arrival to shout it out. The ones who do turn out to either be problems or overachievers. Starkey, however has kept a very low profile since his arrival. He's assigned to mess duty as a food server, and in the evenings he goes around performing little magic

tricks for anyone who's interested. That makes Connor think back to his own first AWOL night. He was given shelter by a trucker who showed him an arm grafted on at the elbow. It was the arm of an Unwind that came with an ability to do card tricks.

"You'll have to let me see some of your magic tricks, Starkey," Connor says, and Starkey seems a little surprised.

"You know everyone's name here?"

"Only the ones who make an impression. Here, let's switch," says Connor. "I'll spot you." They switch positions, and Starkey tries to lift the weight but can barely do two reps.

"I think I'll pass."

Starkey sits up, taking a long look at him. Most people can't hold eye contact with Connor. It's either the scars or his legend that are too intimidating for them. Starkey, however, doesn't look away. "Is it true that you risked getting caught to save a storked baby?"

"Yeah," Connor says. "Not one of my brightest moments."

"Why'd you do it?"

Connor shrugs. "Seemed like a good idea at the time." He tries to laugh it off, but Starkey's not laughing.

"I was a storked baby," Starkey tells him.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"No, it's all good. I just want you to know I respect you for what you did."

"Thanks." Outside, someone calls for Connor in that my-problem-is-earth-shattering tone of voice that he hears on a regular basis. "Duty calls. Take it easy, Starkey." And he leaves, feeling a little bit better than when he came in.

But what he doesn't see is what happens after he's gone: Starkey lying back on the bench press, doing twenty reps of that same weight without even breaking a sweat.

• • •

After the sun sets, Connor calls a meeting of his inner circle—a group of seven that Hayden has dubbed the Holy of Whollies, and the name stuck. They meet in Connor's private jet at the north head of the main

aisle, rather than the old Air Force One, which still reeks of his meeting with Call-Me-Joe, the resistance rep.

It wasn't Connor's idea to have his own private jet any more than it was his idea to wear blue camo. They were both Trace's suggestions to help solidify Connor's image as the fearless leader.

"What the hell kind of army wears blue camouflage anyway?" he griped when Trace first suggested it.

"It's for air attacks by jetpack," Trace told him. "Never actually attempted, but it works in theory."

The idea was to set Connor apart from everyone else. The Admiral had his uniform, all festooned with war medals; Connor needed something to match his own leadership style, whatever that might be. Although he wasn't too thrilled to be running the place like a boot camp, the Admiral had already set things up as a military dictatorship. It wasn't broke, so Connor didn't try to fix it.

It had been suggested that Connor take over the old Air Force One, but that was the Admiral's style, not Connor's. Instead he settled on a small, sleek corporate jet from the outskirts of the graveyard, and had it towed to the north end of the main aisle.

Connor occasionally hears kids grumbling about it: "Look at him living like a king, while the rest of us get nothing but a bedroll."

"Nature of the beast," Trace is always quick to remind him. "Respect doesn't come without a little resentment."

Connor knows he's right, but he doesn't have to like it.

The Holy of Whollies arrive mostly on time for the meeting. Once inside, they swivel side to side in the plush leather chairs, for no other reason than that they can. They enjoy the jet far more than Connor does.

Six out of seven are present. Risa, who's the Graveyard's chief medic, refuses to enter Connor's jet until she can roll in on her own—and a wheelchair ramp just to access Connor's jet seems like an extravagance.

Trace, always the first to arrive, is head of security, as well as Connor's strategic adviser.

Hayden is master of the ComBom, running computer and radio communications, monitoring the outside world, police frequencies,

and all communication with the resistance. He also has a radio station for the Whollies, with a signal that barely reaches half a mile. He calls it "Radio Free Hayden."

There's a big bruiser of a girl everyone calls Bam, who is in charge of food services. Her real name is Bambi, but anyone who calls her that ends up being treated by Risa in the infirmary.

There's Drake, a rural kid who is the Sustainability Boss, which is just a fancy term for the guy who runs the farm, or the Green Aisle, which was entirely Connor's idea. The food it produces has more than once taken the edge off hunger pangs when ADR food shipments have been too small or nonexistent.

Next is John, a gum-chewing kid with a restless leg who's in charge of maintenance and waste management, and finally Ashley, who claims to be very "person centered" and deals with "issues"—and since just about every kid being tagged for unwinding has issues, she's probably the busiest of the bunch.

"So what's this about?" Bam asks. "Because I got stuff to do."

"First off," Connor tells them, "I met with the ADR dude today. We can expect more of the same."

"More o' nothin' is still nothin'," Drake says.

"You got it. We've pretty much known we've been on our own for a while—now it's official. Deal with it."

"What about supplies and stuff we can't scavenge from other planes?" asks John, his leg bouncing more fiercely than usual.

"If we can't get cash from the front office to buy it, we'll have to creatively find it." Creatively finding is Connor's euphemism for stealing. He's had to send kids as far as Phoenix to creatively find things the ADR won't supply. Things like hard-to-find medications and welding torches.

"I just got word that a new jet is being retired here next Tuesday," Hayden tells them. "I'm sure when we gut it, we'll find a lot of things we need. Coolant compressors, hydraulic thingamajiggies, and all that other hardcore mechanical blue-collar stuff."

"Is the baggage compartment gonna be stuffed full of Whollies?" someone asks.

"No plane arrives without mystery meat," Hayden says. "No telling how many kids there'll be, though."

"I hope there aren't any coffins this time," Ashley says. "Do you have any idea how many kids had nightmares from that?"

"Oh please, coffins are so last month," says Hayden. "This time it's beer kegs!"

"The bigger issue," says Connor, "is having an escape plan. We can't rely on the ADR to save us if the Juvies decide it's time for fresh parts."

"Why don't we just bail now," asks Ashley, "and find a new place to be?"

"It's not that easy to move seven hundred kids—and doing it would be like sending up a flare to every Juvey-cop in Arizona. Hayden's team has been doing a pretty good job tracking the threat level, so we'll have at least some warning before a raid—but if we don't have an exit strategy, we're screwed no matter what."

Bam throws a glare at Trace, who never says much at these meetings. "What does *he* think?"

"I think you should do whatever Connor tells you to do," Trace says.

Bam snorts. "Spoken like a true army boeuf."

"Air force," says Trace. "You'd be wise to remember that."

"The point is," says Connor, coming between them before Ashley can launch into her anger management speech, "that we all need to be thinking about how to kick out of here on a moment's notice if we have to."

The rest of the meeting deals with the minutiae of management. Connor wonders how the Admiral could stomach conversations about sanitary napkin supply, when the threat of harvest camp was a clear and present danger every minute of every day. "It's all about delegation," Trace has said—which is the real reason why Connor had called this meeting.

"You can all go," Connor finally tells everyone, "except for Bam and John—we still have things to talk about."

Everyone files out, and Connor has John wait outside, while he talks privately to Bam. Connor knows what he must do, he just doesn't want to do it. Some people take joy in dishing out bad news, but

Connor was never like that. He knows what it's like to be pulled up short, to be told that you're useless, that you're better off unwound.

Bam stands with arms folded, sweating attitude. "So, what's up?"

"Tell me about the tainted meat loaf."

Bam shrugs like it's nothing. "What's the big deal? The generator to one of the refrigerators blew out. It's fixed now."

"How long was the power out?"

"Don't know."

"So you had no clue how long the thing was without power, and you still served the food inside?"

"How was I supposed to know people would get sick? They ate it, so it's their problem."

Connor imagines the punching bag and makes a fist with his right hand. Then he looks at the shark, and forces his hand to relax. "More than forty kids were down for over two days—and we're lucky it wasn't worse."

"Yeah, right, so I won't let it happen again." Bam says it in such a rude tone of voice, Connor can imagine her saying it that same way to her teachers, her parents, the Juvies, every authority figure in her life. Connor hates the fact that he's one of those authority figures now.

"There won't be a next time, Bam. I'm sorry."

"You're getting rid of me just because of one stupid screwup?"

"No one is getting rid of you," Connor tells her. "But you won't be running food service anymore."

She burns him a long, hateful glare, then says, "Fine. To hell with you. I don't need this crap."

"Thank you, Bam," he says, having no idea what possessed him to thank her. "Send John in on your way out."

Bam kicks the jet hatch open and storms out. She turns to John, who waits nervously outside, twisted in a full body flinch from her angry exit.

"Go on in," Bam growls at him. "He's firing you."

• • •

That night Connor finds Starkey doing close-up magic for a bunch of Whollies beneath the recreation jet.

"How does he do that?" kids ask as he makes bracelets disappear from wrists and appear in other people's pockets. When he's done, Connor approaches him.

"You're pretty good. But as the guy in charge, I should ask you to tell me how it's done."

Starkey only smiles. "A magician never reveals his secrets, not even to the guy in charge."

"Listen," says Connor, cutting to the chase, "there's something I want to talk to you about. I've decided to shake things up in the Holy of Whollies."

"A change for the better, I hope," Starkey says, gripping his stomach. Connor chuckles because he already knows Starkey sees where this is going, but that's okay.

"How would you like to be in charge of food?"

"I love food," Starkey says. "And I'm not just saying that."

"Do you think you can handle a team of thirty and get food on the tables three times a day for everyone else?"

Starkey waves his hand and makes an egg appear out of thin air, then hands it to Connor. He saw the egg trick a few minutes earlier, but now its relevance makes it even more entertaining.

"Great," says Connor. "Now conjure up seven hundred more for breakfast." And he walks away, chuckling to himself, knowing that Starkey does have what it takes to make things happen, and make them happen right.

For once Connor's sure he's made the right decision.

OceanofPDF.com

8 · Risa

In the early evenings, when the desert begins to cool, Risa plays piano beneath the left wing of Air Force One. She plays pieces that she knows by heart and pieces from sheet music that have found their way into the Graveyard.

As for the piano itself, it's a black baby grand Hyundai—which made her laugh when she first saw it. She didn't think Hyundai made pianos—but then, why should that surprise her? Multinationals can make anything they want if people will buy it. She once read that Mercedes-Benz had gotten heavy into artificial hearts before the Unwind Accord made such technology pointless. "The Pulsar Omega," the advertisement went. "Take luxury to heart." They invested a fortune in the product, only to lose every penny once unwinding began, and artificial hearts went the way of pagers and CDs.

Tonight she plays a forceful yet subtle Chopin sonata. It pours out like a ground fog, echoing within the hollow fuse-lages where the Whollies live. She knows it comforts them. Even those kids who claim to despise classical music have come asking her why she isn't playing when she's skipped a night. So she plays for them, but not really, because it's herself that she's playing for. Sometimes she has an audience sitting before her in the dust. Other times, like tonight, it's just her. Sometimes Connor comes. He'll sit beside her, yet somehow be distant, as if afraid to invade her musical space. The times Connor comes are her favorite, but he does not come often enough.

"He's got too much on his mind," Hayden has told her, making the excuses that Connor should make for himself. "He's a man of the people." Then he added with a smirk, "Or at least of two people."

Hayden never passes up a chance to throw a verbal barb about Connor's uninvited appendage. It ticks her off, because some things are no laughing matter. Sometimes she catches Connor looking at the arm with an expression that is so opaque, it frightens her. Like maybe he's going to pull out an ax and chop the thing off right in front of

everyone. Even though he also bears a replacement eye, the match is perfect, and the source unknown. It holds no power over him . . . but Roland's arm is different, holding heavy emotional baggage in its powerful grasp.

"Are you wondering if it'll bite you?" she once asked as he gazed at that shark. Startled, Connor went a little bit red, as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't. Then he just shrugged it off. "Nah, I was just wondering when and why Roland got this stupid tattoo. If I ever come across the person who got that particular brain cell, maybe I'll ask." Then he walked away from her, ending the conversation.

If it weren't for those daily leg massages, Risa would think that Connor has forgotten about her completely. But even those massages aren't the same. They feel perfunctory now. Like the only reason he's there is because he made a promise to himself that he would be—not because he truly wants to be.

Thinking about Connor makes her miss a chord—the same damn chord she missed at her life-or-death recital that left her on a bus, speeding her off to be unwound. She growls, then takes her fingers off the keys and draws a deep breath. Her music carries, which means her frustration is being broadcast just as clearly as Radio Free Hayden.

What bothers her most is that she cares. Risa was always able to take care of herself, both physically and emotionally. At the state home, either you developed several layers of personal armor or you were eaten alive. When had that changed? Was it when she was forced to play music as kids were led into the building beneath her to be unwound? Was it when she made the choice to accept a shattered spine, rather than having it replaced by the healthy spine of an Unwind? Or maybe it was before that, when she realized that, against all sense and reason, she had fallen in love with Connor Lassiter?

Risa finishes the sonata, because no matter how she's feeling, she cannot leave a piece of music uncompleted. Then, when she's done, she fights the dry, craggy terrain beneath her wheels and rolls toward a certain private jet.

OceanofPDF.com

9 · Connor

Connor dozes in a chair that's too comfortable to remain fully awake in, but not comfortable enough to be fully asleep. He's jarred alert by a thud against the side of his jet. By the time the second one comes, he realizes it's off to his left. By the time the third one hits, he realizes someone is throwing things at his plane.

He looks out of a window, but in the darkness he sees only his own reflection. Another thud. He cups his hands over his eyes, pressing his face against the glass. The first thing he sees are the curved blue streaks reflecting moonlight. A wheelchair. Then he sees Risa hurling another rock, which hits right above the window.

"What the hell?"

He opens the hatch, hoping she'll stop the barrage. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Nothing," she says. "I was just trying to get your attention."

He chuckles, not yet getting her frame of mind. "There are better ways."

"Not lately."

She moves forward and backward a bit in her chair, crushing a dirt clod that had her tilted at a slight angle. "Not going to invite me in?"

"You're invited. You're always invited."

"Well, then maybe you should have put up a ramp."

And although he knows he's going to regret saying it, he says it anyway. "Maybe you should let someone carry you."

She rolls a bit closer but not enough to close the space between them—just enough to make it painfully awkward. "I'm not an idiot. I know what's going on."

Risa might want this talk right now, but Connor is in no mood. After firing Bam and John, he just wants to end this day and find dreamless sleep until whatever fresh hell awaits in the morning.

"What's going on is that I'm trying to keep us all alive," he says with a little too much irritation in his voice, "and I don't see that as a

problem."

"Yes, you're so busy keeping us alive. Even when you're not busy, you're busy—and when you do actually talk to me, it's all about the ADR, and how hard it is for you, and the weight of the world on *your* shoulders."

"Oh, for God's sake, Risa, you are not the kind of fragile girl who needs a guy's attention to feel whole."

Then the moon comes out from behind a cloud again, and he can see tears glistening on her face. "There's a difference between needing attention and being intentionally ignored."

He opens his mouth to say something, but his brain fails him. He could talk about their daily circulation massages, but she has already pointed out that even then, he's mentally checked out.

"It's the wheelchair, isn't it?"

"No!" he tells her. "It has nothing to do with that."

"So you admit there's a reason."

"I didn't say that."

"What then?"

He steps down from the jet. Three steps that separate his world from Risa's. He kneels before her, trying to look into her eyes, but now they're hidden in shadow. "Risa, I care about you as much as I ever did. You know that."

"Care about me?"

"Love you, okay? I love you." The words don't come easy for Connor. They wouldn't come at all if they weren't true, so that's how he knows they are. He does love her deeply—that's not the problem. And the wheelchair isn't the problem, and neither is his job of running the Graveyard.

"You don't behave like a boy when he's in love."

"Maybe because I'm not a boy," he tells her. "I haven't been for a good long time now."

She thinks about that, and quietly says, "Then show me how you feel the way a man does. And make me believe it."

The challenge hangs heavy in the air. For a moment he imagines himself lifting her out of the chair and carrying her into his jet, all the

way to his room at the back, and gently laying her down on his bed, being for her the man he claims to be.

But Risa will not be carried. Under any circumstances. Ever. And he wonders if maybe this is not entirely his fault. Maybe she's partially to blame for this invisible rift between them.

With no other way to prove his feelings, he reaches forward with his own hand, pushes the hair back from her face, then leans in, giving her a powerful kiss. He puts the whole weight of their relationship and all their built-up frustration into that single superheroic kiss. It should be enough to say everything he can't . . . but when he pulls away, he feels her tears on his cheek, and she says:

"If you wanted me with you, you would have built a ramp."

• • •

Back inside, Connor lies on his bed in the dark, the moonlight painting cold bars of light across his bed. He's angry. Not at Risa, because she's right. It would have been nothing to build a ramp to his jet. He could have done it in half a day.

But what if he had?

What if Risa really could be with him in every possible way—and what if the shark on his arm truly did have a mind of its own? Roland attacked her—he tried to force himself on her, and she must have been looking at that damned shark when he did it. She said it didn't bother her, but it bothers Connor enough to keep him awake night after night. Because what if when they were alone together, in the heat of that passionate moment they both wanted—what if he lost control? What if that hand held her too tight, tugged her too hard—what if it hit her, and hit her again, and again, and wouldn't stop? And how could he ever truly be there with her if all he could think about were all the things that arm had done, and all the things it still might do?

Better not to let it happen.

Better to make sure she's never that close.

So you don't build a ramp. You don't visit her in her jet, and when you do have physical contact, it's out in the open where it's safe. And

when she rolls away from you in tears, you let her go, thinking whatever she wants to think, because that's better than admitting to her that you're too weak to feel safe with your own arm. Then, alone in the dark of a private jet, you smash your fist furiously against a wall until your knuckles are raw and bloody, but you don't care, because even though you can feel the pain, you know they're not *your* knuckles at all.

OceanofPDF.com

10 · Starkey

Starkey spends his days working his particular brand of magic—and he knows that the best magic tricks take practice, patience, and very careful misdirection. Undetectable sleight of hand. For more than a month he has not betrayed his ambitions. To have done so would have made Connor suspicious. Instead he networked among the Whollies, studying the alliances, the friendships, and the power structure—and at last, through careful planning, Starkey has inserted himself in the right place at the right time to gain Connor's favor without him ever knowing that it was all part of Starkey's long-term plan.

Now he's in the highest echelon of the Graveyard, and although it's only food service, it keeps him in direct contact with all seven hundred kids. He has more power, more access, and he begins to do things that previously might be thought of as suspicious, but now come with the territory of being one of the Holy of Whollies.

One afternoon Starkey wanders innocently into the Com-Bom, the Graveyard's computer and communications center, which Hayden runs. Its radio equipment was initially designed to pull in and decode enemy frequencies—which it still does, although now the enemy is the National Juvenile Authority. At any given time it's manned by half a dozen Whollies, who have been handpicked by Hayden for their computer skills.

"I'm not the tech geek everyone makes me out to be," Hayden tells him. "I'm just very good at taking credit for other people's work. I think I get it from my father—he was uniquely skilled at stomping on fingers as he climbed the corporate ladder." Hayden studies Starkey for a moment, and Starkey just smiles back.

"Something wrong?"

"No," Hayden says. "I was just wondering if you're thinking of stealing my position. Not that I care. I wouldn't mind working food service for a while, but it would help me to know what your intentions are."

"I just want to know how stuff works around here, that's all."

"Oh," says Hayden, "you're one of *those*." Starkey doesn't know what kind of "those" he's talking about, but he doesn't care as long as Hayden tells him what he wants to know.

"I have an ethnically diverse team here," Hayden tells him proudly, going around the room. "Tad is Japanese, Hailey is umber, Jeevan is Indian—and Esme is half-Hispanic. I think her other half must be extraterrestrial, because she's too damn smart to be all human." Esme preens proudly for a moment, then gets back to work cracking coded communications. "We have Nasim, who's Muslim, working side by side with Lizbeth, who's Jewish, and guess what? They're in love."

"Bite me," says Nasim, then Lizbeth punches him just hard enough to make it clear that it's true.

Hayden points out the various monitoring consoles. "There's a communications monitoring program running on this one. It can pull keywords out of anything from e-mails to phone conversations. It can warn us if the Juvey-cops are up to something major. Kind of an early warning system originally developed to fight terrorism, but isn't it nice to know we can now use it for civilian purposes?"

"So what do we do if it says things are getting dangerous?"

"Damned if I know," Hayden says. "That's Connor's department."

There's a console from which Hayden creates playlists and runs interviews for his Radio Free Hayden show.

"You realize that it doesn't broadcast any farther than you can shout," Starkey tells him with a smirk.

"Of course not," Hayden says. "If it did, then the Juvies could pick it up."

"If no one is listening, then who's it for?"

"First off," says Hayden, "your assumption that no one is listening is incorrect. I estimate I have at least five or six listeners at any given time."

"Yes," says Tad. "He means us."

"And second," Hayden says, not denying it, "it's preparing me for a career in broadcasting, which I plan to pursue once I turn seventeen and get out of this place."

"Not hanging around to help Connor, huh?"

"My loyalty has the half-life of unpasteurized milk," Hayden tells him. "I'd take a bullet for Connor, and he knows it. But only until I'm seventeen." It all seems pretty straightforward until Esme says, "I thought you already were seventeen."

Hayden shifts his shoulders uncomfortably. "Last year didn't count."

Next to Jeevan is a printout. A list of names, addresses, and dates. Starkey picks it up. "What's this?"

"Our good man Jeeves here is responsible for getting us a list of all the kids slated for unwinding from here all the way to Phoenix."

"These are the kids for your rescue missions?"

"Not all of them," Hayden says. "We pick and choose. We can't save everyone, but we do what we can." He points out the highlighted names—the ones chosen for rescue—and as Starkey looks over the list, he starts to get angry. There's information about each kid, including birth dates—except for the ones who don't have a birth date. Instead a stork date is listed. None of the storked kids are highlighted.

"So you and Connor don't like saving storked kids?" Starkey asks, not even attempting to hide the chill in his voice.

Hayden looks genuinely perplexed and takes the list to look at it. "Hmm, I hadn't noticed. Anyway, it's not part of our criteria. We look for only-children in dimly lit suburban neighborhoods. It means fewer people to squeal on us, and less of a chance of being seen. See, brothers and sisters can't keep their mouths shut, no matter what we threaten them with. I guess mothers who stork babies mostly give them to people who are parents already. Hard to find a storked only child."

"Well," says Starkey, "maybe we need to change the criteria."

Hayden shrugs like it's nothing, like it doesn't really matter, and it just makes Starkey angrier. "Take it up with Connor," he says, then goes on with his grand tour of the communications center, but Starkey's not listening anymore.

• • •

The revelation in the ComBom gives Starkey a game-changing idea. One by one he singles out all the storked kids in the Graveyard. It's not an easy task, because most storks want to keep their storking a shameful secret. Starkey, however, makes no secret of his own doorstep arrival, and soon the storked kids begin to seek him out, seeing him as their champion.

As it turns out, a full fourth of the Graveyard population are storks. He keeps that information to himself.

The girl named Bam, who at first hated him because he took her place in the Holy of Whollies, warms to him quickly because she's a stork as well. "If you want your revenge on Connor, be patient," he tells her. "It will come." She reluctantly takes his word for it.

One day Starkey catches Connor when he's busy supervising the dismantling of an engine.

"Is there a buyer for it, or are they gonna put it up for sale?" Starkey asks pleasantly.

"They asked for it in the front office, that's all I know."

"The engine says Rolls-Royce—I thought they only made cars."

"Nope."

Starkey keeps chatting about pointless stuff, until he's sure that Connor is irritated at having to divide his attention between the engine and Starkey. That's when Starkey pulls out what he's been hiding up his sleeve.

"Listen, I've been thinking . . . you know I was storked, right? And well, you know, it's nothing big, but I thought it might be nice to make some special reserved time just for storked kids at the Rec Jet. Just to show them they won't be discriminated against anymore."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Connor says, as he stares at the engine, happy to be ending the conversation. He never even realizes what he's just given away.

Starkey calls his little group the Stork Club and stakes out the hour between seven and eight every evening. While everyone's looking somewhere else, a new class distinction rises within the Graveyard. The Stork Club is the only minority with special members-only time at the Rec Jet. It's a taste of privilege that these kids have never had before—and Starkey wants them to gobble it up. He wants them to get

used to it. He wants them all to expect it—and to know that Starkey can deliver.

Since Starkey runs food services, members of the Stork Club start replacing others in serving positions, and dole out larger servings to other storks with a wink. In the Holy of Whollies, the only ones who seem wise to these little creeping alliances are Ashley, whose job it is to root out social flare points, and that obnoxious Sherman kid who replaced John as head of waste and sanitation. It turns out Ralphy was easily bribed to look the other way, and as for Ashley, Starkey pretty much has it under control.

"What if giving storks special treatment creates resentment in the general population?" Ashley asks him as he supervises dinner one night.

"Well," Starkey tells her with a mildly seductive smile, "the general population can kiss my ass."

It makes Ashley blush just a little bit. "Just try to keep a low profile, okay?"

Still beaming charm, he says, "It's what I do best," and serves her a nice heaping portion, all the while calculating how she might secretly play into his plans.

"You're a hard guy to read," she tells him. "I'd really like to get inside your head."

To which he responds, "The feeling's mutual."

• • •

Each night, during "the stork hour" at the Rec Jet, Starkey plants tiny seeds of discontent over games of pool and Ping-Pong. Nothing so blatant as fomenting a revolution, just innocent suggestions to encourage certain directions of thought.

"I think Connor's done a good job for a guy who's not all that smart," he tells them offhandedly. Or, "I really like Connor. He's not much of a leader, but isn't he a great guy?"

Starkey never shows any open defiance; that would be counterproductive. It's not about tearing Connor down, it's about rotting out his roots. He won't even suggest that he should be the one

taking Connor's place. That suggestion will eventually come from other storks—and all on their own, without any prompting from him. He knows it will happen, because he knows that every storked kid, deep down, dreams of a world where they're not considered second-class citizens. That makes Starkey more than just the leader of a club. It makes him the hope for storked salvation.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Three

Windows of the Soul

Collected on the Internet, October 2011:

Kidney and other organ prices on the global criminal markets are based upon publicly available reports and are quoted in U.S. dollars. The price represents the amount either paid to the seller of the organ or the price paid by the buyer for the organ.

Average paid by kidney buyer: $150,000
Average paid to seller of kidney: $5,000
Kidney broker in Yemen: $60,000
Kidney broker in the Philippines: $1,000 to $1,500
Kidney buyer in Israel: $125,000 to $135,000
Kidney buyer in Moldova: $100,000 to $250,000
Kidney buyer in Singapore: $300,000
Kidney buyer in United States: $30,000
Kidney buyer in China: $87,000
Kidney buyer in Saudi Arabia: $16,000
Kidney seller in Bangladesh: $2,500
Kidney seller in China: $15,000
Kidney seller in Egypt: $2,000
Kidney seller in Kenya: $650
Kidney seller in Moldova: $2,500 to $3,000
Kidney seller in Peru: $5,000
Kidney seller in Ukraine: $200,000
Kidney seller in Vietnam: $2,410
Kidney seller in Yemen: $5,000
Kidney seller in the Philippines: $2,000 to $10,000
Liver buyer in China: $21,900
Liver seller in China: $3,660

Courtesy of www.havocscope.com

OceanofPDF.com

11 · Smoker

The boy is certain he's going to die.

He sprained his ankle falling into the pit, maybe even broke it. Now it's swollen and blue, and has been that way for days. It's bad, but it's not the worst of his problems.

The pit is more than ten feet deep, and even if his ankle were fine, he'd never be able to climb out. For five days he's been screaming for help, and now his voice is nothing but a dry rasp.

And all because of those stupid cigarettes.

It had been weeks since he had a smoke. His supplier had been arrested again, and although there were kids at school who bragged about smoking, no one would offer him a cigarette, or even give him the name of a dealer. That's why he came to this part of town—a warehouse district of unused, rotting buildings, many of which were condemned, but no one wanted to waste the money or energy it would take to tear them down.

He knew if he was ever going to score himself some smokes again, this was the place to do it. Even if it was just one or two from some skank nic addict, it would be worth it. That day was the third time he detoured through the warehouse streets on the way home from school, and nothing. No one. It seemed not even the nic addicts found the warehouse district worthy of their attention.

So imagine his surprise when he saw an open door, and cigarette butts strewn on the ground in front of it, like they had no better place to be.

He stepped into the rotting building. The huge space smelled of evolving mold, and paint chips littered the ground like a fall of leaves.

Then he saw it—way at the back of the warehouse was a mattress. It was dirty, shredded, probably the digs of some homeless dude. Nothing was remarkable about it. What was remarkable was the unopened carton of cigarettes sitting on the mattress.

He couldn't believe his luck! He looked around to make sure there was no one there, then hurried to the mattress, and, stepping onto it, reached for the cigarette carton.

Even before he touched the carton, the mattress fell out beneath his feet and plunged into the pit. Although the mattress had mostly broken his fall, his right ankle hit the ground unprotected. He almost blacked out from the pain, and when his vision cleared he realized what had happened.

He was furious. His initial thought was that this was some sort of practical joke—as if his buddies from school would be looking down at him at any moment, pointing and laughing, calling him an idiot. But he quickly came to understand that this was not a joke at all. This was a trap.

But if this was a trap, why had no one come for five days?

There had been a jug of water and a box of crackers at the bottom of the pit on the day he fell in, along with a ceramic pot to relieve himself in. Whoever set the trap didn't want him to starve, but he did not do well with the rationing. The food and water was gone in three days, and now there's nothing left but a lousy carton of cigarettes, which he can't smoke because there aren't any matches. At one point he tried to eat the tobacco right out of the wrapper, figuring it might have some nutritional value, but it only made him dry-heave.

Now, with day five coming to an end, he's convinced no one's coming for him. No one's going to find him until it's too late.

Then, just before dark, he hears footsteps crunching the paint chips on the warehouse floor.

"Hey," he tries to yell, "over here!" His voice is barely a hiss, but it's enough. A face appears, looking down at him.

"My God, what are you doing down there? Are you okay?"

"Help . . ."

"Hold tight," says the man. He goes away and comes back a few moments later with an aluminum ladder, which he lowers into the pit. Although the boy has no strength to even stand, some secret reserve of adrenaline fuels his climb and helps him bear the pain of putting weight on his ruined ankle. In half a minute he's out of the pit, throwing his arms around the stranger who saved him.

The man sits him down. “Here, have something to drink,” he says and hands the boy a water bottle. The boy guzzles it like it’s the only water in the world. “How long have you been down there?”

“Five days.” He gags as he tries to swallow the water, almost throwing it up, but he manages to keep it down.

The man kneels to him, shaking his head. “AWOL Unwinds are always getting themselves into trouble. You gotta be more careful.”

The boy shakes his head. “I’m not an Unwind.”

The man grins and nods knowingly. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say. Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Then the boy feels a sudden prick on his arm.

“Ouch!” He sees a drop of blood on his forearm, which the stranger collects with a small electronic device. “What are you doing?”

The man ignores him, looking at the readout of the device. The boy’s aunt is a diabetic, and she checks her blood sugar with something like it, but the boy suspects this device has a different purpose, although he’s not sure what that purpose is.

“Hmm,” says the man, raising an eyebrow, “it looks like you’re telling the truth. Your DNA doesn’t match any of the kids in the AWOL Unwind database.”

“Oh, I get it. You’re a Juvey-cop!” He’s relieved, because a Juvey-cop is safe. A Juvey-cop will take him home to his parents, who must be worried sick.

“Well . . . I *was* a Juvey-cop,” the man says, “but I’m no longer in that line of work.” Then he holds out his hand to shake. “The name’s Nelson. And you are?”

“Bennett, Bennett Garvin.” Only now that he’s had some water and some time does he focus enough attention to get a good look at Nelson. He’s unshaven, his nails are dirty, and it appears he hasn’t been taking good care of himself. But the most startling thing about him are his eyes. There’s a strange disconnected intensity about them that doesn’t match the rest of him. In fact, the eyes don’t even match each other. Two different shades of blue. It’s unnerving.

“Could you call my parents?” Bennett asks. “Let them know you’ve found me?”

The faint smile never leaves Nelson's face. "Oh, I don't think that will be happening today."

Bennett doesn't say anything as he struggles to grasp the situation —but having not eaten, and with the water not yet in his system, everything seems a little fuzzy.

"I can't let you go now that you've seen me." Then Nelson grabs him roughly, squeezing his arm, poking his side, and putting a dirty hand in Bennett's mouth to check his teeth like a horse. "Aside from that nasty ankle, you're a top-notch specimen. A little dehydrated, but nothing a few more water bottles won't take care of. And the black market harvesters don't care whether you're an official Unwind or not —they pay just the same."

"No!" Bennett tries to pull free, but he doesn't have the strength. "Please don't hurt me!"

Nelson laughs. "Hurt you? I wouldn't think of it. The better your condition, the more you'll be worth to me."

"My parents have money. They'll pay you."

"I don't do ransoms," he tells him, "but I'll tell you what—I like your eyes, they're very expressive. And because I like your eyes, I'll give you a fighting chance." Nelson points to the entrance. "If you can get to the front door before I tranq you, I'll let you go. Hell, I'll even give you a ten-second head start." He hauls Bennett to his feet. "Ready, set, go!"

Bennett does not need a second invitation. He takes off across the expanse of the warehouse, feeling dizzy, feeling like his feet won't move. But somehow, he makes them go.

"One!"

His ankle throbs, but he ignores it. His lungs ache, but he doesn't care. He knows this is life and death. The pain is only temporary.

"Two!"

Paint chips crush beneath his feet like eggshells.

"Three!"

Water sloshes in his belly, making it ache even worse, but he doesn't let it slow him down.

"Four!"

The door to the warehouse is open wide. The twilight spilling through the door is as glorious as the bright light of a midday sun.

"Five!"

A few yards to go—he's almost there!

"Six-seven-eight-nine-ten!"

Even before he realizes he's been cheated, the tranq dart hits him right in the back of his neck, delivering a full dose directly into his brain stem. His legs buckle beneath him, and suddenly that door that seemed so close might as well be a million miles away. His eyes cross, his vision blurs, and he smells musty toxicity as the side of his head hits the ground. He fights to keep conscious, while above him looms the shadow of Nelson, a dark ghost in a fading field of vision. . . . And the moment before he loses consciousness, he hears Nelson say:

"I really do like your eyes. I like them much more than the ones I have now."

OceanofPDF.com

12 · Nelson

J. T. Nelson knows he'll never get rich selling careless kids to black market harvesters. Even back when his catches were legitimate, there was no real money in it—but then it didn't matter. When he was a Juvey-cop, he was willing to accept a steady salary, health benefits, and the promise of a pension. He had been more than satisfied with his place in life, maintaining order and bringing AWOLs to justice. But all that changed on the day the Akron AWOL took him out with his own tranq gun. Nearly a year later, he still can't get the image of Connor Lassiter out of his mind: that smug, arrogant look on his face as he shot the tranq bullet into Nelson's leg.

For Nelson, that was a shot heard round the world.

From that moment on, his life was a living hell. He was the butt of jokes—not just in his department, but around the nation. He was held up to ridicule, as the cop responsible for letting the infamous Unwind go. So Connor Lassiter became legend and Nelson lost his job, and his self-respect. Even his wife left him.

But he only wallowed for a little while. He was full of anger but knew how to take anger and mold it into something useful. If the Juvenile Authority no longer wanted him, he might as well be in business for himself. Black marketeers don't laugh at him for having let Connor Lassiter get away, and they ask no questions.

At first it was just AWOLs. They were quick to fall for his various traps like the stupid kids they are. Then he caught his first runaway, a kid whose DNA didn't show up on the AWOL Unwind database. He thought the black marketeers would turn him away, but they didn't care. As long as the subject was healthy, he got his price. There were even kids like the one he caught today, who were just unlucky. He's happy to take them, too. His conscience doesn't bother him.

What bothers him are their eyes.

That's what he has the most trouble with. The way they look at him. Those fearful, pleading expressions, always hopeful down to the last

second, as if he might have a change of heart. Those eyes plague him in his dreams. They're windows of the soul, aren't they? But in those early days as a parts pirate, when he looked at his own eyes in the mirror, he didn't see what he saw in theirs. His "windows" showed no such expression of soulfulness, and the more he looked at his own empty eyes, the more jealous he became. He wanted some of that innocence, that desperate hope for himself. So one day he went to his black market contact and claimed the eyes of his latest catch as part of his payment. He was only able to negotiate himself a single eye, but at least that was better than nothing. After that first operation, when he looked at himself in the mirror, he would see in that eye a shred of humanity, and for a little while, he'd be high on hope. It would remind him of the idealistic young man he had once been many years before. One problem, however: Now he had one blue eye and one brown. That wouldn't do.

So he claimed another, but that eye didn't quite match the first. So he claimed another, and another, and with each operation he felt a sliver of innocence return to him. He knows that someday soon he'll find the eyes that will make him perfect, and then he can finally rest . . . because by seeing the world through other's eyes, Nelson is bit by bit becoming whole.

• • •

The black marketeer wears an expensive European suit and drives a Porsche. He looks more like a legitimate businessman than a shady figure who deals in flesh. He doesn't hide the fact that his business has made him rich. Instead he flaunts his wealth with the entitled disregard of royalty. Nelson envies him his style.

He goes by the name Divan, like some sort of fashion designer, and doesn't refer to himself as a black marketer, but as an "independent supplier." His offshore harvest camp is hidden and mysterious. Not even Nelson knows where it is, and he suspects its operation has none of the strict regulations of American harvest camps.

He meets Nelson in Sarnia, a Canadian town just across the bridge from Port Huron, Michigan. Divan cannot step on American soil.

There are numerous warrants out for his arrest. But the Canadians, bless them, have been far more tolerant.

Divan takes possession of the boy with the damaged ankle in the back of a car dealership that he uses as his front. As he looks the boy over, he frowns at the swollen ankle and wags a finger at Nelson—all part of his standard ploy to barter Nelson down. The boy, conscious now but still groggy from a heavy dose of tranqs, mumbles incoherently, and although Nelson ignores him, Divan pats him gently on the cheek.

"Don't you worry about a thing," he tells the boy. "We are not barbarians." It's one of the lines he always uses. It conveys no real information to the boy but somehow comforts him. It's calculated, like everything else about Divan.

The boy is taken away, a price is negotiated, and, as is his custom, Divan pays Nelson in cash from a money clip filled with countless bills. Then he claps Nelson on the back jovially. Nelson gets more respect as a parts pirate than he ever did from his superiors as a juvenile enforcement officer.

"I can always count on you to bring me what I need. Not all my associates are so consistent. Now that the Juvenile Authority is offering rewards for AWOL Unwinds, I find fewer come my way."

"Goddamn Cap-17 law," Nelson says.

"Yes. Let's hope it's not a sign that society is slipping back to its old, less civilized ways."

"Not a chance," Nelson tells him. "People won't go back there."

He was just a child when the Unwind Accord was passed and the war ended—but it's not the war that sticks in his mind from those days. It's the fear of the ferals. With the failure of the public school system, the nation was overrun by teenagers out of work, out of school, and with nothing to do even before the war. In fact, that fear triggered the war more than anything else. One side claimed the ferals were created by the collapse of family values, while the other side claimed the ferals were a product of rigid beliefs that no longer met the world's needs. Both sides were right. Both sides were wrong—but it didn't matter when people were terrified to go into the streets at night from fear of their own kids.

"Unwinding didn't just end the war," Nelson points out to Divan. "It ripped out the weeds. Kept them from choking the rest of us out. Fear of the AWOLs will keep both of us in business."

"I sincerely hope you're right." Divan opens his mouth as if to say more, but thinks better of it.

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Nothing to trouble yourself with. Just rumors. We'll talk more upon your next visit. And if you could, please keep in mind that I'm experiencing a shortage of girls. Ones with red hair in particular. Also umbers—either gender. And, of course, I'll always pay a high price for 'People of Chance.' "

"I'll keep it in mind," says Nelson, already scheming a way of fulfilling Divan's request. He'd yet to capture a Native American kid, but one of these days those so-called "People of Chance" would bust and leave Nelson with not just a winning hand, but an entire winning body.

As he drives back across the bridge and onto American soil, his spirits are high. If Divan has worries, they're unfounded. Although Nelson has, in recent days, chosen the life of an outsider, he still feels he has a finger on the pulse of the times. With so much of the civilized world employing the practice of unwinding, how could anyone deny that it is a viable alternative for the troubled, the useless, and the unwanted? Like the ads say, "Unwinding isn't just good medicine—it's the right idea."

It was the very rightness of the idea that made Nelson become a Juvey-cop to begin with. The knowledge that he would leave the world a cleaner, brighter place by dredging the dregs from the streets was what propelled him into the police academy. Eventually, though, his ideals were replaced by an abiding hatred for those marked for unwinding. They were all alike, these Unwinds; sucking valuable resources from those more deserving, and clinging to their pathetic individuality, rather than accepting peaceful division. They insisted on living lives no one else felt were worth the effort. As an officer of the law, the rules of conduct held him back—but as a parts pirate, he could take care of business much more effectively. So, as much as he blamed Connor Lassiter for ruining his life, perhaps the boy had done

him a favor. Still, it is supremely satisfying to know that the Akron AWOL died an ignoble death at Happy Jack Harvest Camp. It gives Nelson hope that maybe there truly is justice in the universe.

OceanofPDF.com

13 · Connor

A retired 787 arrives with only fourteen Whollies packed in empty beer barrels in the hold. Connor wonders if someone in the resistance is just getting bored, or if the barrels were really the most inconspicuous way to ship them. The kids all exit the hold cramped and hunched from the ride, and Connor delivers his usual rallying speech, troubled by the diminishing number of kids in each arriving plane.

Then, after they've been brought to the IHOP jet for assessment, and to get them ready for life in the Graveyard, Connor returns with Trace to the 787. It's the old Boeing Dreamliner, the first one of its kind to arrive at the Graveyard. It was once heralded as the salvation of the aviation industry, and it certainly served its purpose, but there's always something newer, faster, and more fuel-efficient ready to take any jet's place.

"She's still impressive," says Trace, as they walk through the passenger compartment, which is already sweltering in the Arizona sun. "A classical beauty."

"You think you could fly this plane if you had to?" Connor asks him as they size up the Dreamliner.

Trace grins. "I've been flying Cessnas since I was sixteen, and military aircraft for a year before I joined the ADR, so yes, I could fly a commercial airliner. Hell, I could make it do loop-the-loops."

"Good. You may need to do loops if we're being targeted."

Trace puzzles over this for a second, then grins. "Escape jet?"

"If we gut it, we can fit everyone in. Won't be comfortable, but it'll work."

"I'll research the specs and see if it can handle the weight."

"We'll gut the cabin, then have the front-office guys post it all for sale," Connor tells him. "We'll include the engine parts and the cockpit console on the sale list, but we won't really dismantle any of the plane's actual working parts."

Trace gets it without having to be told. "So, to anyone keeping tabs on us, it'll appear that the jet has totally gone to salvage, but we'll know it's still operational."

"Exactly. Then we'll tow it to the main aisle—make it seem like we're using it as a dormitory jet."

"Brilliant."

"No," says Connor, "desperate. Now, let's get out of this thing before we fry."

• • •

Trace drives Connor back to the main aisle from the runway. In addition to being head of security in the Graveyard, he's Connor's acting bodyguard and chauffeur. Not Connor's idea, any more than the private jet and the blue camo, but it helped create that illusory leadership pedestal. From the beginning, though, Connor hated the idea of being set apart.

"Get used to it," Risa told him. "You're not just some random Unwind anymore; to these kids, you *are* the resistance. You need to project the image of someone in charge." He wonders if she still feels that way, now that being in charge doesn't leave enough room in his life to truly be there for her. He wonders if he should invent himself some illness just so he can visit her in the infirmary jet. Is that proper behavior for a leader?

"The Dreamliner is a good idea," Trace says, bringing Connor back to the here and now. "But I know there are other things on your mind."

"Always," Connor tells him.

"I know you're worried about the Juvies, and why they're still leaving us alone." Trace waits a moment, then adds, "I think I know why, but you're not going to like it."

"When have I ever liked anything about the Juvies?"

"It's not about them as much as it's about *you*."

"I don't follow."

"You will." They hit a bump, and Connor reflexively grabs onto the door. Trace makes no apologies for his driving. "See, Connor, the kids

here, even though they've been legally made nonentities, that doesn't make them worthless. They're as valuable as diamonds. Do you know why diamonds are so expensive?"

"I don't know—because they're rare?"

"No, they're *not* rare. In fact, there are so many of them, they could be as cheap as the fake ones. But there's this thing called the diamond consortium. All the owners of all the world's diamond mines get together, and you know what they do? They hide their diamonds in this huge vault in this huge bank in Sweden or Switzerland or wherever. Thousands upon thousands of them. And hiding them creates the illusion that diamonds are rare, driving the prices through the roof."

The Jeep hits another pothole, and this time Connor absorbs the impact without bracing himself. He follows Trace's line of thought, beginning to worry about where it's leading.

"So," says Trace, "after the Cap-17 law passed, there was a shortage of Unwinds, right? The price for every kind of transplant doubled—tripled even. But people pay the price, because everyone's used to getting the parts they want, when they want them. They'll go without food, but they won't go without their parts."

"So what does that have to do with me?"

"You tell me."

Connor considers what Trace had said, and the truth hits him. "We're the vault! And as long as we pull AWOLs off the street, it keeps the price high. Is that what you're saying?"

"Better that all those AWOLs are here, nice and safe, than caught by parts pirates and sold on the black market. That would just drive the price down."

Connor thinks back to that day he was caught and hauled off to Happy Jack Harvest Camp. It had been a shock when the Juvey-cop interrogating him admitted that they knew all about the Graveyard but turned a blind eye, because going after the kids here wasn't worth the effort.

But this is different.

This makes Connor a willing part of the system. To know that he actually plays into some unwinding consortium's plan makes Connor

feel dirty—worse than dirty.

And then, when the deeper revelation hits him, it's like a knockout blow. The final punch that leaves him flat on the canvas.

"How long," he asks Trace, "have you been working for the Juvies?"

Trace just drives the Jeep, keeping his eyes straight ahead, and doesn't answer for at least ten seconds. Finally he says, "Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to."

OceanofPDF.com

14 · Dolores

While World War II aircraft enjoy the privilege of permanent museum displays, Korean War fixed-wing aircraft are mostly unloved and forgotten. Since it was the first war to feature extensive use of helicopters, those are the aircraft that get all the attention.

There's a sorry bomber from the Korean War that sits two aisles off the main aisle. The Admiral put it there, and although Connor has moved planes around it, Dolores, as she is called, never moves and is never opened. Her hatch has been retrofitted with a key lock, and Connor has the only key, which he wears around his neck like a latchkey child.

Dolores is the arsenal. She's filled with the kind of weapons that troubled teens should not, under any circumstances, have access to. Unless of course they're in uniform. The idea that the Graveyard would someday have to defend itself like the Warsaw Ghetto hung over the Admiral's head, and now hangs over Connor's. There's not a day he doesn't think about it—not a day he doesn't finger that key around his neck like a cross. Today, however, he visits Dolores for another reason—to defend the Graveyard not from attack, but from infiltration. Today he goes in to find himself a .22 caliber pistol and a cartridge of bullets.

OceanofPDF.com

15 · Connor

Trace sleeps in a rusty old DC-3, overseeing the roughest, most troublesome kids. It's an unofficial detention hall, with Trace as the unofficial guard. Since the old propeller plane has a nonfunctioning lavatory, its occupants have to use a portable that sits at the bottom of the gangway stairs. Its lock is broken. Connor broke it a few hours before.

After curfew he and two of the toughest Whollies he could scrounge up wait in the shadows of a neighboring plane, watching.

"Tell us again why we're taking out Trace?"

"Shh!" Connor tells them, then whispers, "Because I say we are."

Connor is the only one with a gun. It's loaded. The goons are just backup, because he knows he can't take Trace alone. The plan is to corner him, cuff him, and keep him as a sort of prisoner of war . . . but Connor has resolved that he'll use the gun if it becomes necessary.

Never wield a weapon unless you're willing to use it, the Admiral once told him. If Connor is going to maintain order in this place, he has to go by the Admiral's playbook.

Every twenty minutes or so, someone comes out to use the restroom. Trace isn't one of them.

"Are we supposed to wait here all night?" complains the tough kid holding the cuffs.

"Yes, if we have to." Connor begins to wonder if Trace's military training included superhuman bladder control, until Trace comes down a few minutes after midnight.

They wait until the door of the portable closes, and then they quietly approach with Connor in the lead. He puts the pistol in his right hand—Roland's hand—feeling the coldness of its handle and firmness of its trigger. He takes the safety off, takes a deep breath, and then swings the door open.

Trace stands there, staring right at him, not caught off guard in the least. In a single move he kicks Connor's legs out from under him,

grabs the gun out of his hand, twists him around, and pushes him cheek-first into the dirt, wrenching Roland's arm painfully behind his back. Connor can feel the seam of the graft threatening to tear loose.

With Connor in too much pain to move, Trace brings down the other two kids before they can run, leaving them unconscious in the dust. Then he returns his attention to Connor.

"First of all," says Trace, "ambushing a man taking a dump is beneath you. Secondly, never take a deep breath before attacking someone, because it gives you away."

Connor, still in pain, spins around to face him, and as he does, he feels the muzzle of the gun pressed to his forehead. Trace holds the gun to Connor's head for a moment more, his face stern, then takes it away. "Don't feel too bad," Trace says. "I'm not just an air force boeuf, I was special ops. I could have killed you nine different ways before you hit the ground." He ejects the clip—but as he does, Connor grabs Trace's wrist, tugs him off balance, wrenches the gun from him, and aims it at Trace again as he gets to his feet.

"There's still a bullet in the chamber," Connor reminds him.

Trace backs away, hands up. "Well played. I guess I'm rusty." They stand there frozen for a moment, and Trace says, "If you're going to kill me, do it now—because I *will* get the advantage again." But Connor's resolve is gone, and they both know it.

"Did you kill the other two?" asks Connor, looking at how the once-tough kids lay twisted and unconscious on the ground.

"Just knocked them out. Not much honor in killing the defenseless."

Connor lowers the gun. Trace doesn't rush him.

"I want you gone," Connor tells him.

"Tossing me out will be a very bad move."

Hearing that just makes Connor angry. "As far as I'm concerned, you're the enemy. You work for *them*."

"I also work for you."

"You can't have it both ways!"

"That's where you're wrong," Trace says. "Playing both sides is a time-honored strategy."

"I'm not your puppet!"

"No," says Trace, "you're my commanding officer. Act like it."

Another kid comes clambering down the stairs to use the portable. He catches sight of Trace and Connor, and the two kids still rag-dolled on the ground. "What's the deal?" the kid says as he takes in the situation.

"When it's your business, I'll tell you," Connor says.

Then he sees the gun in Connor's hand. "Yeah, sure, no problem," he says, and goes back up the stairs.

Connor realizes the distraction would have given Trace plenty of time to turn the tables again, but he didn't. It moves them one step closer to trust. Connor gestures to Trace with a wave of the gun. "Walk." But at this point the gun is just a prop, and they both know it. They move farther from the main aisle and down an aisle of mothballed fighter jets. No Whollies here to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"If you work for them," Connor asks, "then why did you tell me all the things you told me?"

"Because I'm their eyes and ears, but my brain is my own—and whether you believe it or not, I like what you're doing here."

"What have you told them about this place?"

Trace shrugs. "Mostly what they already know. That things are under control here. That a new shipment of AWOLs arrives every few weeks. I assure them that the place is not a threat, and no one's planning to blow up any more harvest camps." Then Trace stops walking and turns to Connor. "What's more important are the things I *don't* tell them."

"Which are?"

"I don't tell them about your rescue missions, I don't tell them about your escape plan . . . and I don't tell them that you're still alive."

"What?"

"As far as they know, this place is being run by Elvis Robert Mullard, a former security guard from Happy Jack—because if anyone knew that *you* were the one in charge, the Juvey-cops would raid this place in an instant. The Akron AWOL is too much of a threat for them to ignore. So I make this place sound like a nursery, and I make you

sound like a nanny. It keeps them happy, and it keeps all these kids alive."

Connor looks around them. They're far from the main aisle now. If Trace wanted to, he could probably break Connor's neck and bury him, and no one would ever know. Does that mean that Connor actually trusts Trace in spite of his obvious betrayal? He isn't sure of anything anymore, not even his own motivations.

"None of this changes the fact that you're working for the Juvey-cops."

"Wrong again. I don't work for the Juvies, I work for the people who own them."

"No one owns the Juvenile Authority."

"All right, then, maybe not own, but control. You want to talk about puppets? Every single Juvey-cop is on a string they don't even know about. Of course I don't know who's pulling the strings. All I know is that I got taken away from a promising future in the air force and got sent here."

Connor grins in spite of himself. "Sorry to mess with your career track."

"The point is, I don't report to anyone in the air force; I report to civilians in suits, and that ticks me off. So I did a little research and found out that I work for a company called Proactive Citizenry."

"Never heard of it."

Then Trace drops his voice to a whisper. "I'm not surprised—they keep a low profile, and that provides a cover that gives the military plausible deniability. Think about it; if the brass don't know who they're actually working for, then if something goes wrong, the military can always claim ignorance, court-martial me, and come away clean."

Now things are becoming a little clearer to Connor, or at least clearer as to why Trace decided to play both sides. They turn and begin walking back toward the main aisle.

"I'm disillusioned, Connor. The way I see it, you've been more fair and more trustworthy than whoever it is I work for. Character counts for a lot in this world, and when it comes to Proactive Citizenry, shady doesn't even begin to describe them. So I'll do my job for them, but I put my trust in you."

“How do I know you’re not lying to me now?”

“You don’t. But so far you’ve survived because of your instincts. What do your instincts tell you right now?”

Connor thinks about it and realizes the answer is easy. “My instincts tell me that I’m screwed no matter what I do. But that’s normal for me.”

Trace accepts his answer. “We have more to talk about, but I think that’s enough for one day. You should probably put some ice on that shoulder. I wrenched it pretty hard.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Connor lies.

Trace reaches out his hand to shake, and Connor considers what shaking that hand means. It could be the creation of their own secret society to battle Proactive Citizenry, whatever that is . . . or it could mean Connor has been entirely duped. In the end, he shakes Trace’s hand, wishing that just once, there could be a clear course of action.

“Before today you were just a pawn doing what *they* wanted you to do,” Trace tells him. “Deep down you knew it—you sensed it. I hope the truth has set you free.”

OceanofPDF.com

16 · Risa

Before her shift begins each morning, Risa spends time beneath the wing of the Rec Jet, chatting with other kids who've become her friends. She has more friends here than she did back at the state home, but at the same time she feels more like an older sister than a friend. They revere her like some angel of mercy—not just because she's the medical authority, but because she's the legendary Risa Ward, the Akron AWOL's partner in crime. She suspects they think, deep down, she can heal things that are broken inside.

She used to spend time at the Rec Jet in the evening, after her shift, but the Stork Club put an end to that. She has half a mind to demand equal time for the state wards, but knows that fueling a division of the Graveyard into factions won't do anything but cause trouble. Thanks to Starkey, there's enough of that going on without her help.

Farther away, she can see Connor step down from his jet. He walks along the main aisle, head down, hands in his pockets, deep in whatever dark cloud is troubling him today. Immediately he's set upon by kids who need his attention for one reason or another. She wonders if he ever manages to find a spare second for himself anymore. He certainly doesn't have it for her.

He looks up and catches Risa's gaze. She turns away, feeling guilty, as if she's been spying on him, and chides herself for feeling that way. When she looks up again, he's heading toward her. Behind her kids have begun to gather in front of the TV. Something on the news has caught their attention. She wonders whether Connor is coming to see what the commotion is about or coming to see her. She's pleased when it turns out to be the latter, although she tries not to show it.

"Busy day ahead?" she asks him, offering him a slight smile, which he returns.

"Nah, just lying around watching TV and eating chips. I gotta get a life."

He stands there with his hands in his pockets, looking around, although she knows his attention is on her. Finally he says, "The ADR says they'll send those medical supplies you asked for in the next few days."

"Should I believe it?"

"Probably not."

She knows this is not the reason why he came over to her, but she doesn't know how to coax things out of him anymore. She knows she has to do something before this distance between them gets ingrown.

"So what's the problem of the week?" she asks.

He scratches his neck and looks off, so he doesn't have to look her in the eye. "Sort of the same, and sort of you-don't-want-to-know."

"But," says Risa, "it's big enough for you to tell me that you can't tell me."

"Exactly."

Risa sighs. It's already getting hot, and she's not looking forward to pushing her way to the infirmary jet in the heat. She has no patience for Connor being enigmatic. She's about to tell him to come back when he actually has something to say, but her attention is snagged by the grumble coming from the crowd around the TV, which has grown since she last looked. Both she and Connor are pulled closer by the gravity of the crowd.

The news report is an interview with a woman, rather severe-looking, and even more severe-talking. Coming in the middle, Risa can't make heads or tails of what she's talking about.

"Can you believe it?" someone says. "They're calling this thing a new life form."

"Calling what a new life form?" Connor asks.

Hayden is there and turns to both of them. He looks almost queasy. "They've finally built the perfect beast. The first composite human being."

There are no pictures, but the woman is describing the process—how bits and pieces of almost a hundred different Unwinds were used to create it. Risa feels a shiver go as far down her spine as she can feel. Connor must have the same reaction, because he grasps her shoulder, and she reaches up to grasp his hand, not caring which hand it is.

“Why would they do such a thing?” she asks.

“Because they can,” Connor says bitterly.

Risa can feel the heaviness of the vibe around her, as if they’re all watching some awful global event unfolding before their eyes.

“We need to get the escape plan ready,” Connor says. Risa knows he’s talking more to himself than to her. “We can’t do a dry run, because the spy sats will pick it up, but everyone needs to know what to do.”

Risa feels the same blast of communal intuition. Suddenly getting the hell out of the Graveyard sounds like a very good idea. Even without a safe destination.

“Composite human . . . ,” someone grumbles. “I wonder what it looks like.”

“C’mon, haven’t you ever seen Mr. Potato Head?”

There’s a smattering of nervous laughter, but it doesn’t lighten the mood.

“Whatever it looks like,” Risa says, “I hope we never see it.”

OceanofPDF.com

17 · Cam

With a finger he traces the lines of his face, down the side of his nose to his cheek. Left, then right. Out from the symmetrical starburst of flesh tones on his forehead, then beyond to the lines that spread beneath his hairline. He dips his finger into the graft-grade healing cream again and spreads it across the lines running down the nape of his neck, his shoulders, his chest, and every other place he can reach. He can feel the tingling as the engineered microorganisms in the cream do their job.

"Believe it or not, the stuff is actually related to yogurt," the dermatologist told him. "Except, of course, that it eats scar tissue." It also costs five thousand dollars a jar, but, as Roberta has told him, money is no object when it comes to Cam.

He's been assured that when treatment is done, he'll have no scars at all, just hairline seams where every little bit of himself meets.

His cream-spreading ritual takes half an hour, twice a day, and he's come to enjoy the Zen-like nature of it. He only wishes there were something that would heal the scars in his mind, which he can still feel. He sees his mind now as an archipelago of islands that he labors to build bridges between—and while he's had great success engineering the most spectacular of bridges, he suspects there are some islands he'll never reach.

There's a knock at his door. "Are you ready?" It's Roberta.

"Reins in your fist," he tells her.

A pause, and then, "Very funny. 'Hold your horses.' "

Cam laughs. He no longer needs to speak in metaphors—he's created enough bridges in his mind to bring some normality to his speech—but he enjoys teasing Roberta and trying to stump her.

He dresses in a tailored shirt and tie. The tie's muted colors, yet bold, fractal pattern, were specifically chosen to project a sense of aesthetic composition; a subliminal suggestion that an artistic whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. He fumbles with the tie.

While his brain knows how to tie it, his virtuoso fingers obviously had never learned to do a Windsor knot. He must focus and overcome the frustrating lack of muscle memory.

Roberta knocks again, a little more insistently now. "It's time."

He takes a moment to admire himself in the mirror. His hair is just about an inch long now. A virtual coat of many colors; streaks extending out from the focal point of multiple skin tones on his forehead. Blond runs down the middle, blending to amber on both the left and right. Shades of red and brown arc back from his temples, then give way to jet black above his ears, and tight, dark curls at his sideburns. "All the famous hairstylists will be trampling one another to get to you," Roberta said.

Finally he opens the door before Roberta's knocking becomes frantic. Her dress is a little more elegant than the slacks and blouse she usually wears, but still very understated. It's all calculated to keep the focus on him. For a moment she seems annoyed at him, but now that she gets a good look at him, her irritation melts away.

"You look spectacular, Cam." She smoothes out his shirt and straightens his tie. "You look like the shining star you are!"

"Let's hope I don't give birth to complex elements."

She looks at him quizzically.

"Supernova," he says. "If I'm a shining star, let's hope I don't blow up." He wasn't even trying to stump her. "Sorry—it's just the way I think."

She gently takes him by the arm. "Come, they're waiting for you."

"How many?"

"We didn't want you to be overwhelmed by your first press conference, so we limited it to thirty."

His heart beats heavily, and he must take a few deep breaths to slow it down. He doesn't know why he should be so nervous. They have prepared him with three mock press conferences already, where questions were hurled at him in multiple languages. In each one of those he did just fine—and this time it will be only in English, so he has one less variable to worry about.

This one, however, is real. This time he's about to be officially introduced to a world that is unprepared for him. The faces he saw at

those fake press conferences were friendly ones pretending not to be, but today he will be facing actual strangers. Some will just be curious, others amazed, and some might be flat-out horrified. Roberta told him to expect this. What he's worried about are the things that not even she can predict.

They walk down the hall to a spiral staircase that leads to the main living room—a staircase he had not been allowed to use for his first weeks, until his coordination improved. Now, however, he could dance his way down those stairs if he chose to. Roberta tells him to wait until she announces him. She goes down first, and Cam can hear the rumble of chattering reporters die down. The lights dim, and she begins her presentation.

"Since time immemorial, mankind has dreamed of creating life," Roberta begins, her voice amplified and larger than life. Flashes of light reach the top of the stairs. Cam can't see the images from her presentation, but he knows them. He's seen it all before.

"But the great mystery of life itself has been elusive," Roberta continues, "and every dream of creation has ended in humbling failure. There's a good reason for that. We can't create what we don't understand, so until we understand what life is, how can we ever create it? No—instead it is the task of science to take what we already have and build on it. Not create life, but perfect it. So we put forth the question, how can we recombine both our intellectual and physical evolution into the finest version of ourselves, the best of all of us combined? As it turns out, the answer was simple once we knew the right question." She pauses to build the suspense. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Camus Comprix, the world's first fully composite human being!"

At the sound of applause, Cam begins his descent down the spiral staircase, posture proud but gait casual. The audience is still in shadows as he descends, and all the lights are focused on him. He can feel the heat of the spotlights, and although he's in a familiar place, it's as if they've transformed the living room into a theater. He hesitates halfway down, takes a deep breath, and continues, making it seem that his pause was intentional—a photo-op tease, perhaps, because this is

one press conference where no cameras are allowed. His presentation to the public is being carefully orchestrated.

The applause gives way to astonishment as the crowd gets a good look at him. There are gasps and whispered chatter as he descends to the microphone. Roberta steps aside, giving him the floor, and by the time she does, there is absolute silence in the room as they all stare at him, trying to process what they're seeing: a young man who is, as Roberta put it, "the best of all of us." Or at least the best of various unwound teens.

In the charged silence, he leans toward the microphone and says, "Well, I have to say, you're a very well put-together group."

Chuckles all around. He's surprised by the amplified timbre of his own voice, a resonant baritone that sounds more confident than he actually is. The lights come up over the group of reporters, and with the ice broken, the first hands rise with questions.

"Pleased to meet you, Camus," says a man in a suit that's seen better days. "I understand you're made up of almost a hundred different people—is that true?"

"Ninety-nine to be exact," Cam says with a grin. "But there's room for one more."

The group of reporters laughs again, less nervously than the first time. He calls on a woman with big hair.

"You're clearly . . . um . . . a *unique* creation." Cam can feel her disapproval like a wave of heat. "How does it feel to know you were invented rather than born?"

"I was born, just not all at the same time," he tells her. "And I wasn't invented, I was reinvented. There's a difference."

"Yes," says someone else. "It must be quite a weight to know that you're the first of your kind. . . ."

This line of questioning was addressed in the mock conferences, and Cam knows his answers by heart. "Everyone feels like they're one of a kind, don't they? That makes me no different from anyone else."

"Mr. Comprix—I'm an expert in dialects, but I can't place yours. You keep shifting in and out of vocal styles."

Cam hasn't considered this before. It's hard enough to put thoughts into words, without thinking about how those words are coming out.

“Well, I suppose that all depends on which brain cells I’m wrangling.”

“So then your verbal eloquence came hardwired?”

Again, the kind of question he’s expecting. “If I were a computer, it would be hardwired, but I’m not. I’m a hundred percent organic. Human. But to answer your question, some of my skills came from before, others have come since, and I’m sure I’ll continue to grow as a human being.”

“But you’re not a human being,” someone shouts from the back. “You might be made from them, but you’re no more human that a football is a pig.”

Something about this statement—this accusation—cuts him in an unguarded place. He’s not prepared for the emotion it brings forth.

“Bull seeing red!” Cam says. It comes out before he can funnel it through his language center. He clears his throat and finds the words. “You’re trying to provoke me. Perhaps there’s a blade you’re hiding behind your cape, but it won’t keep you from getting gored.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I don’t know—was that an insult?”

Murmurs from the crowd. He’s made it interesting for them. Roberta throws him a warning glance, but Cam suddenly feels the rage of dozens of unwound kids swelling in him. He must give it voice.

“Is there anyone else out there who thinks that I’m somehow subhuman?”

And as he looks out to the thirty reporters, hands go up. Not just the big-haired woman and the heckler from the back, but others as well. As many as a dozen. Do they really mean it, or are they all just matadors flapping the cape?

“Monet!” he shouts. “Seurat! Close to the canvas, their work looks like splotches of paint. But at a distance you see a masterpiece.” Someone controlling the media screens pulls up a spontaneous Monet, but rather than punctuating his point, it makes his comments seem contrived. “You people are all small-minded and have no distance!”

“Sounds like you’re very full of yourself,” someone says.

“Who said that?” He looks around the crowd. No one will take credit. “I’m full of everyone else—and that’s spectacular.”

Roberta approaches and tries to take over the microphone, but he pushes her away. “No!” he says. “They want to know the truth? I’m telling them the truth!”

And suddenly the questions come like bullets.

“Did they tell you to say all this?”

“Is there a reason why you were made?”

“Do you know all their names?”

“Do you dream their dreams?”

“Do you feel their unwindings?”

“If you’re made of the unwanted, what makes you think you’re any better?”

The questions come so fast and with such intensity, Cam can feel his mind begin to rattle itself into fragments. He doesn’t know which one to answer—if he can even answer any of them.

“What legal rights should a rewound being have?”

“Can you reproduce?”

“*Should* he reproduce?”

“Is he even alive?”

He can’t slow his breathing. He can’t capture his own thoughts. He can’t see clearly. Voices make no sense, and he can see only parts, but not the larger picture. Faces. A microphone. Roberta is grabbing him, trying to focus him, trying to get him to look at her, but his head can’t stop shaking.

“Red light! Brake pedal! Brick wall! Pencils down!” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Stop?” It’s a plea to Roberta. She can make this go away. She can do anything.

“Looks like he’s not wound too tight,” someone says, and everyone laughs.

He grabs the microphone one more time, his lips pressed against it. Screeching. Distorted.

“I am more than the parts I’m made of!”

“I am more!”

“I am . . .”

“I . . .”

“I . . .”

And a single voice says calmly, simply, “What if you’re not?”

"..."

"That's all for now," Roberta tells the jabbering crowd. "Thank you for coming."

• • •

He cries, unable to stop. He doesn't know where he is, where Roberta has brought him to. He is nowhere. There is no one in the world but the two of them.

"Shhh," she tells him, gently rocking him back and forth. "It's all right. Everything will be all right."

But it does nothing to calm him. He wants to make the memory of those judgmental faces go away. Can she cut it out of his mind? Replace the memory with some random thoughts of another random Unwind? Can they do that for him? Can they please?

"This was just a first salvo from a world that still needs to process you," Roberta says. "The next one will go better."

Next one? How could he even survive a next one?

"Caboose!" he says. "Closed cover. Credits roll."

"No," Roberta tells him, holding him even more tightly. "It's not the end, this is just the beginning, and I know you'll rise to meet the challenge. You just need a thicker skin."

"Then graft me one!"

She chuckles like it's a joke, and her laughing makes him laugh too, which makes her laugh only louder, and suddenly in the midst of his tears he finds himself in a fit of laughter, yet angry at himself for it. He doesn't even know why he's laughing, but he can't stop, any more than he could stop crying. Finally he gets himself under control. He's exhausted. All he wants to do is sleep. It will be that way for him for a long time.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"Have you ever stopped to think about all the people helped by Unwinding? Not just the recipients of much-needed tissues, but the thousands employed in the medical profession and supporting industries. The children, the husbands and wives of people whose lives are saved by grafts and transplants. How about soldiers wounded in the

field of duty, healed and restored by the precious parts they receive? Think about it. We all know someone who has been positively touched by unwinding. But now the so-called Anti-Divisional Resistance threatens our health, our safety, our jobs, and our economy by disregarding a federal law that took a long and painful war to achieve.

"Write to your congressperson today. Tell your legislators what you think. Demand that they stand up against the ADR. Let's keep our nation and our world on the right path.

"Unwinding. It's not just good medicine, it's the right idea."

—Paid for by the Consortium of Concerned Taxpayers

Cam is in full mental and emotional regression. All kinds of theories for his backward slide are postulated and debated. Perhaps his rewound parts are rejecting one another. Perhaps his new neural connections are overloaded with conflicting information and have begun to collapse. The fact of it is that he has simply stopped talking, stopped performing for them—he's even stopped eating and is now on an IV.

All nature of tests have been done on him, but Cam knows the tests will show nothing, because they can't probe his mind. They can't quantify his will to live—or lack of will.

Roberta paces in his bedroom. At first she showed great concern, but over the past few weeks, her concern has mildewed into frustration and anger.

"Do you think I don't know what you're doing?"

He responds by tugging his IV out of his arm.

Roberta comes to him quickly and reconnects it. "You're being a stubborn, obstinate child!"

"Socrates," he tells her. "Hemlock! Bottoms up."

"No!" she shouts at him. "I will not allow you to take your own life! It's not yours to take!"

She sits in a chair beside him, calming herself down. "If you won't live for yourself," she begs him, "then do it for me. *Thrive* for me. You've become my life, you know that, don't you? If you die, you'll be taking me with you."

He won't look her in the eye. "Unfair."

Roberta sighs as Cam watches the relentless drip, drip, drip of the feeding tube that's keeping him alive. He's hungry. He's been hungry

for a long time, but it's not enough to motivate him to eat. What's the point in maintaining your life when it's in question whether you're even alive at all?

"I know the press conference was a mistake," Roberta admits. "It was too soon—you weren't ready—but I've been out there doing some pretty effective damage control. The next time you face the public, it will be different."

Only now does he meet her eyes. "There won't be a next time."

Roberta smiles slightly. "Ah! So you *can* put together a coherent thought."

Cam squirms and looks away again. "Of course I can. I just choose not to."

She pats his hand, her eyes moist. "You're a good boy, Cam. A sensitive boy. I will make sure we don't forget that. I'll also make sure you get whatever you want—whatever you need. No one will force you to do anything you don't want to do."

"I don't want the public."

"You will when it's yours," Roberta tells him. "When they're trampling one another just to get a look at you. Not as some oddity, but as a star. A celebrated star. You need to show the world what I know you're capable of." She hesitates for a moment, preparing to tell him something. Perhaps something she's afraid he's not ready for. "I've been giving this a great deal of thought, and I believe what you need is someone to go out there with you. Someone who has completely accepted you and can draw the public's curiosity in a more positive way. Dampen their judgment."

He looks up at her, but she dismisses the idea before he can even propose it. "No, it can't be me. I'm seen as your handler. That won't do. What you need is a pretty little planet revolving around your star. . . ."

The idea intrigues him. It makes him realize that he hungers for more than mere sustenance. He hungers for connection. He's seen no one his age since his creation. His age, he's decided, is sixteen. No one can tell him any different. To have a companion—one who was born, not made—would bring him one step closer to being truly human.

Roberta has calculated right this time. This gives him a fair measure of motivation. Once more he reaches for his IV line.

"Cam, don't," pleads Roberta. "Please, don't."

"Don't worry." He disconnects the IV and gets out of bed for the first time in weeks. His joints ache almost as badly as his seams. He walks to the window and peers out. He wasn't even aware of the time of day until now. Dusk. The setting sun hides behind a cloud just above the horizon. The sea shimmers, and the sky is a brilliant canvas of color. Could Roberta be right? Could he have as much of a claim on this world as anyone else? Could he have more?

"Self-determination," he decrees. "I will make decisions for myself now."

"Of course, of course," Roberta says. "And I'll be here to advise you."

"Advise, not order. Not control. I will choose what I do, and when I do it. And I will choose my own companion."

Roberta nods. "Agreed."

"Good. I'm hungry," he tells her. "Have them bring me a steak." Then he reconsiders. "No . . . have them bring me lobster."

"Whatever makes you happy, Cam." And Roberta hurries off to do his bidding.

OceanofPDF.com

18 · Risa

Risa is woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of feet pounding up AcMac's ramp. She's hoping this late-night visitor isn't for her, but it always is. No one comes here in the middle of the night unless there's some kind of medical emergency requiring her attention.

Kiana pulls back the curtain and barges in. "Risa, a couple of kids just got brought in. It's bad, real bad."

Kiana's a sixteen-year-old who works the infirmary's night shift, lives for drama, and always blows everything out of proportion. Having been purged from a family of doctors, she has a chip on her shoulder when it comes to proving what a good junior medic she is, so her exaggerations are usually just to make herself look better when she solves the emergency. The fact that Kiana has come to get Risa and isn't trying to take all the glory herself means the situation must truly be serious.

"A couple of kids were messing with an engine turbine," Kiana tells her, "and the whole engine came down. . . ."

Risa pulls herself out of bed and into her chair. "What were they doing messing with an engine turbine in the middle of the night?"

"I think it was some sort of dare."

"Incredible." Half the injuries Risa sees are either self-destructive or just plain stupid. She often wonders whether it's just the nature of Whollies, or if it's the same in the outside world.

When she arrives at the infirmary jet, every medic, both on and off duty, is already there. While a couple are older teens who stayed behind when they reached seventeen, the rest are just kids who have been trained to treat minor injuries, nothing more. The sight of blood doesn't scare Risa anymore. What scares her are her own limitations—and from the moment she rolls in, she knows she's way out of her depth.

In the corner one kid grimaces and groans with an obviously dislocated shoulder—but he's getting only minimal attention, because the kid on the table is much worse off. His side has a huge, jagged wound through which Risa can see at least one protruding rib. He quivers and moans. Several kids frantically try to stem the bleeding, applying pressure to key arteries, and one kid with shaking hands tries to fill a syringe.

"Lidocaine or epinephrine?" Risa asks.

"Lidocaine?" he says, like it's a question.

"I'll administer. There are epinephrine injectors already prepared."

He looks at her like he got caught in the school hallway without a pass.

"Adrenaline!" she says. "It's the same as adrenaline."

"Right! I know where those are!"

Risa tries to focus in, not allowing herself to be overwhelmed by the larger picture, and gives the injured boy the first shot, which will ease the pain.

"Did anyone call the doctor?" Risa asks.

"Like three times," says Kiana.

There's a doctor who comes out to the Graveyard when they have something on their hands they can't handle. He does it free of charge, no questions asked, since he's sympathetic to the resistance; however, he takes their calls only when he wants to. Even if they're able to reach him, however, Risa knows what he'll say.

"We have to get him to a hospital."

Once she says it, all the kids there are visibly relieved, because now this boy's life will not be in their hands. With all the injuries at the Graveyard, only twice before have they had to send a kid to a hospital. Both times the injured kid died. Risa is determined that it will not happen again.

"Hurts bad," the kid says, between gasps and grimaces.

"Shh," says Risa, and she sees his eyeballs begin to roll. "Stay focused on me." She gives him the epinephrine shot, which should slow his bleeding and hopefully keep him from going into shock. "Tell me your name."

"Dylan," he says. "Dylan Ward."

"Really? I was a ward too. Ohio State Home Twenty-Three."

"Florida Magnolia. Florida state homes don't got numbers. They're named after flowers."

"Figures."

Dylan Ward is thirteen, maybe fourteen. He has a bad cleft lip, and looking at it makes her angry, because like her, he was a ward of the state—and while parents won't unwind a kid on his looks alone, the state homes have no problem unwinding kids they don't want to look at. For Risa, saving him now is a matter of honor. She tells Kiana to get the ambulance.

"It has a flat," Kiana tells her.

Risa growls in frustration. "Fix it!"

"Don't leave," Dylan says, putting all his trust in her.

"I won't," she reassures him.

The ADR keeps promising to permanently station a doctor at the Graveyard, but that has yet to happen. She knows the resistance has other priorities, but when a kid is bleeding out, it's a pretty lame excuse.

"Am I gonna die?" Dylan asks.

"Of course not," she tells him. In truth, Risa has no idea whether he'll live or die, but that's not very comforting to hear, and no one wants the truth when they ask that question.

Risa rolls her way over whatever debris is on the floor and down the plane's rear ramp, where a bunch of kids have gathered to fret.

One kid comes forward. It's Starkey. Ever since Connor put him in charge of food service, he thinks his nose belongs in everything. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you have powers of teleportation and can get us to a hospital."

"Sorry," he says, "my tricks are just tricks."

That's when Connor runs up.

"I heard about the accident. Is everyone okay?"

Risa shakes her head. "One kid we can take care of, but the other"—again a shiver of memory—"has to go to a hospital."

Connor's lips go thin, and his legs start to shake like they did back when he was in the safe houses. He stops his fear response by

pounding his fist into his hand, and he nods. “Okay,” he says, “okay, we’ll do what has to be done.” Only then does he seem to notice that Starkey’s there. “Is Starkey helping you?”

“Not really,” says Risa. Then, just to get rid of him, she says, “He can help fix the flat on the ambulance.”

Starkey looks insulted for a moment, then smiles. “Right, no problem.” And he trots off.

The ambulance is a seatless minivan, jury-rigged with medical equipment. Dylan is rushed down the stairs and loaded inside. One of the other medics will drive, and Kiana will tend to Dylan in the back. The boy calls for Risa, but she can’t get in with him. Once more she silently curses her wheels.

Starkey still lingers. He turns to Connor. “You mean you’re not going?” Starkey asks.

“The Admiral never left the Graveyard until he was carried out,” Connor tells him. “I lead by his example.”

Starkey shrugs. “It makes you look like a coward.”

Connor throws a quick glare at him.

“Hey, I’m just saying.”

“I don’t care what it looks like,” Connor says forcefully. “I do what I have to keep this place alive.”

“Sorry, I mean no disrespect, I guess I just have a lot to learn about being in charge.”

Starkey nods respectfully to Risa and leaves, but what he said sticks in her mind like gum on her shoe—or at least how it used to get on her shoe when her feet actually touched the ground. Connor is right, of course. If he went to the hospital, it would be a foolhardy show of bravado—the sign of an arrogant leader, not a responsible one. But Risa, on the other hand, has nothing holding her back but her wheelchair. And when has she ever let that stop her?

“I’m going this time,” she tells Connor.

Connor throws up his hands. “Risa, no one expects you to go. No one is going to think you’re a coward if you don’t.” He looks over at the minivan. “And getting you there, it’s too much—”

“Too much of a burden?” Risa finishes.

"I was going to say too much effort when every second counts for this kid."

But her mind is set. "After what happened the other times," she tells him, "I have to go."

"It won't change the outcome either way," Connor points out.

"I know," she tells him, even though she's not entirely sure he's right. He backs away as two of the medics lift her chair into the van.

"Even if they catch me, they can't unwind me," she reminds him. "I'm seventeen. And besides, the disabled can't be unwound."

"What if they recognize you?"

"Oh, please," Risa says. "It's our names that people know, much more than our faces. I'll be fine." Then she offers him a slim but sincere smile, and he reluctantly returns it. It doesn't bridge the gap between them, but at least it marks the spot where the bridge might be built. She closes the van's back door without saying good-bye, because they share a secret superstition, never saying good-bye to each other. Risa will soon regret that she didn't.

• • •

It's a bumpy ride out of the Graveyard with no paved roads, just the hardpan desert flattened by the wheels of jets. There's more than a mile to the gate. In the back, Dylan moans with every bump. As they approach, the guards on duty, notified of the emergency, quickly open the gate.

Once they're on paved roads, the ride is easier, and Dylan quiets down. Risa comforts him and monitors his vital signs.

The first time they had to bring a kid to the hospital, Kiana went with one of the other medics—a kid who panicked whenever Band-Aids didn't stick—but he was the only other medically-experienced kid willing to venture out of the Graveyard on what was potentially a suicide mission. That first time, a new arrival had climbed to the tail of a cargo jet on a dare. He fell and cracked his skull. Risa would have gone, but everyone convinced her there was no point and it was too impractical. Kiana and the nervous medic had taken the boy to the hospital with a whole fake story of what happened and documents to

back up a fake identity. The boy died in the hospital. The second time it was a girl with a burst appendix. Again the girl was rushed to the hospital, again Risa stayed behind, and again the girl died.

Risa doesn't know what her presence at the hospital can do. All she knows is that she can't sit back and wait to hear about another kid's death.

• • •

Kiana helps Risa out of the back, then single-handedly carries Dylan into the ER waiting room, with Risa rolling in behind her. Now Risa must display her acting skills. She thinks about her friends in the band who had been playing in the Chop Shop when it blew—the ones who died—and the memory brings necessary tears to her eyes. Then she dredges up a character that saved her once before: the ditzy girl who talks in questions.

"Hello, can somebody help us? My brother was on the roof fixing tiles? And he fell from the roof and got hurt real bad? And we didn't know what to do? So we brought him here, but there's a lot of blood and we're really scared? Can you help us?"

She hopes the tears plus the ditz can scramble anyone's BS detectors as effectively as Hush Puppy once scrambled radar. There are rumors that the Juvies have started using DNA decoders in the field. She can only hope that they haven't trickled down to hospitals yet.

Emergency room staff drop whatever they're doing and rush to their aid. In a second Dylan's on a gurney, being wheeled through the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY doors.

"Is he going to be okay?" asks Risa, in panic that's only partially feigned. "Because our parents are out of town? And we didn't know what to do?"

"We'll take care of him, honey," says a nurse in a comforting tone. "Don't you worry." The nurse glances at Kiana, who has Dylan's blood on her clothes, then heads off into the emergency room.

The doors swing closed, and Risa rolls over to the admissions desk, with a carefully planned wallet of false information, organized to

appear disorganized, and intentionally designed to make Risa appear helpless and flustered.

"We'll sort this all out later," the admissions clerk says, giving up and getting on to the next person in line.

• • •

An hour of waiting with no word. Kiana's been pacing, no matter how much Risa tells her to calm down, but perhaps being nervous just plays into their cover story. Finally the same nurse comes out into the waiting room. The woman is slightly teary-eyed, and Risa feels a pit in her stomach, as if Dylan, who she didn't know before today, really is her brother.

"Honey, I'm afraid the news isn't good. You're going to have to prepare yourself."

Risa grips the wheels of her chair, feeling a well of emotion beginning to bubble from deep inside her. Kiana puts her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry," the nurse says, "but your brother was just too badly injured. We did everything we could. . . ."

Risa just looks at her in disbelief and shock. The nurse puts her hand on Risa's, patting it gently. "I can't imagine what you must be feeling right now, but we're going to have to notify your parents. We've been trying, but no one picks up at the numbers you gave us. Do you have any other way of contacting them?"

Risa, her hair dangling in front of her face, shakes her head.

"Well then," says the nurse, "we'll have to keep trying. In the meantime, if there's anyone else you can call . . ."

"Can you give us a few moments?" Risa asks quietly.

"Of course, dear." The nurse squeezes her hand reassuringly and goes back through the emergency room doors, where Dylan's body waits to be claimed by parents that don't exist. Risa wipes her tears away, trying to find comfort in the fact that she did the best that she could.

And then Kiana says, "It's just like the other times."

That makes Risa look up, and something occurs to her. She wonders *how* similar it is.

"Kiana . . . you *do* know we're supposed to go to a different hospital each time, right?"

By the look on Kiana's face, Risa can tell she never learned that particular protocol. "Shouldn't it be the closest hospital in an emergency?" Kiana asks.

The sudden dread that Risa feels is balanced with an equal amount of hope. "The other times you were here, did you see that same nurse?"

"I think so. At least once. That's bad, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. I'll be back."

Risa rolls herself toward the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL doors and pushes her way through. She finds herself in a hallway that's more starkly lit and even less inviting than the waiting room.

While hundreds of people flow through an emergency room, there aren't many teenage kids with parents who mysteriously can't be reached, and whose "siblings" vanish upon pronouncement of death. This nurse must have recognized Kiana—there is no question in Risa's mind. Which means there's more than one level of deception here.

"Excuse me," someone says from farther down the hall, "you're not supposed to be in here."

But Risa doesn't care. She rolls into a large room marked RECOVERY. It's subdivided by curtains into cubicles with hospital beds, and she begins to pull back each curtain one by one. An empty bed. An old woman. Another empty bed, and finally, Dylan Ward. His wound has been dressed; an IV leads into his arm. He's unconscious, but a monitor shows a steady heartbeat. He's anything but dead.

Just then the nurse comes up behind Risa and turns her chair around. The woman is nowhere near as teary-eyed as before.

"You need to leave right now, or I'll call security."

Risa locks the brake, so the chair can't be wheeled away. "You told me he was dead!"

"And you told me he was your brother."

"We're taking him and leaving," Risa says, with authority enough in her voice to make it stick if she had any leverage whatsoever.

Unfortunately, she doesn't.

"He's in no condition to travel—and even if he was, I would never turn an AWOL Unwind over to anyone but the Juvenile Authority."

"Is that what you did with the others? Gave them to the Juvey-cops?"

"That's my business," the nurse tells her, as cold as can be.

"At least give me the courtesy of knowing if the other two are still alive."

The nurse looks at her hatefully, then says, "They're alive. But probably in a divided state by now."

Risa wishes she could get out of her wheelchair and slam this woman into the wall. Burning gazes fry the air between them like microwaves.

"You think I don't know what goes on down there at the Graveyard? I know; my brother's a Juvey-cop. It's a wonder they don't round you all up and send you off where you belong!" And she points off, as if knowing the exact direction of the nearest harvest camp. "People out there are dying for lack of parts, but you and your selfish friends in the resistance would rather let good people die."

So here it is, thinks Risa. The rift between two completely different versions of right and wrong. This woman sees Risa as a filthy outlaw, and nothing will ever change that.

"Are you really doing this to help society," Risa snaps, "or is it for the reward money?"

The woman breaks her gaze, and Risa knows the truth. The woman's moral high ground has split beneath her, and she's fallen into the chasm.

"You go back and tend to your dirty horde," the nurse says. "Do that and I'll pretend you were never here."

But Risa can't go. She can't leave Dylan to be unwound.

Just then a Juvey-cop comes into the emergency room.

"Over here," calls the nurse, and looks back to Risa. "Leave now, and I'll let you and your friend in the waiting room go. Maybe you can't be unwound, but you most certainly can be locked up."

But Risa is not going anywhere.

The nurse greets the cop, who by his looks is very obviously her older brother. He spares a long, curious glance at Risa before looking at the boy in the bed.

"This him?" he asks.

"We've stabilized him, but he's lost a lot of blood. He won't be ready for transport for a while."

"Keep him sedated," says the cop. "Best that he doesn't wake up until he's at the harvest camp."

Risa grips her chair, knowing what she's going to do at least ten seconds before she does it. Ten seconds of silent personal terror, but no indecision whatsoever.

"Take me," she says. "Take me instead."

She knows Connor won't approve. She knows he'll be furious, but she can't muddy her resolve with thoughts of him now. This is about saving Dylan Ward.

The cop studies her—clearly he knows exactly who she is and exactly what her offer means.

"From my understanding, you're seventeen, Miss Ward, and seeing that you're in a wheelchair, we couldn't unwind you anyway. So what possible value do you have?"

She smiles, finally having the upper hand. "Are you kidding me? A notorious member of the Anti-Divisional Resistance who knows exactly what happened at Happy Jack that day?"

He takes a moment to consider her point. "I'm not an idiot," he says. "You'll never cooperate. You'd rather die than cooperate."

"Perhaps," admits Risa, "but why should that matter to you? No matter how uncooperative I am, you'll still get credit for bringing me in, won't you?"

She can practically hear his mind clicking and whirring. "What's going to stop me from capturing both you and the kid in the bed?"

"If you try," Risa says calmly, "then you lose the prize. I have a subcutaneous cyanide pill in my palm." She holds out her hand for him to see. "It's right under the skin. All I have to do is bring my hands together to crack it open." Then she mimes a wide clap, stopping just short of her palms touching. "You see," she says with a grin, "there's more than one type of clapper."

There is, of course, no such pill under her skin, but he doesn't have to know that. Even if he suspects she's bluffing, he's not sure enough to risk it.

"If I die right here, right now," Risa says, "you won't be known as the cop who brought me in, but the cop who let me die while in your custody." Then she smiles again. "That's almost as bad as getting shot in the leg with one's own tranq pistol, isn't it?"

The man frowns at the thought of being associated in any way with that other unfortunate Juvey-cop.

The nurse is not happy with any of this. She crosses her arms. "What about my reward money?" she asks.

Then her brother turns to her like an older brother should and says, "Shut it, Eva, all right? Just shut it."

And with that, the deal is done.

Dylan's chart will remain marked with his bogus records, and when he's fit to travel, he'll be released to Kiana, no questions asked.

But as for Risa, her life now lies on a different path.

OceanofPDF.com

19 · Cam

A suitable partner for Camus Comprix—one with all the right qualities—is not easy to find. More than two hundred girls go through the interview process. All of them have strong credentials. There are actresses and models, scholars, and high-society debutantes. Roberta has left no stone unturned in drumming up the perfect planet for her star.

The final twenty are brought to Cam for his assessment in a cushy fireside interview in the grand living room. They are all well-dressed, pretty, and smart. Most of them talk about their résumés as if applying for an office job. Some look at him with no qualms, while others can't look him in the eye at all. There's one girl who fawns all over him, putting off more heat than the fireplace.

"I would love to be your first," she says. "You can *do* that, can't you? I mean you're . . . *complete*, right?"

"More than complete," he tells her. "In fact, I have three."

She just stares at him dumbfounded, and he decides not to tell her he's joking.

He finds himself attracted to some, left cold by others—but in none of them does he find the spark of connection he has hoped for. By the time he gets to the last girl, a Boston scholar with New York fashion sense, he just wants to get this day over with. The girl is one of those who is intrigued by his face. She doesn't just look at him, though, she studies him like a specimen under a microscope.

"So what do you see when you look at me?" he asks.

"It's not what's on the outside—it's the inside that matters," she responds.

"And what do you think is inside?"

She hesitates, then asks, "Is this a trick question?"

Roberta is exasperated when he refuses to accept a single one of them. Dinner between the two of them that night is all clattering silverware and intense cutting of meat. They barely look at each other

across the table. Finally Roberta says, "We're not looking for your soul mate, Cam, just someone to fill a role. A consort to help ease you into public life."

"Maybe I'm not willing to settle for that."

"Being practical is not the same as settling."

Cam slams his fist down. "My decision! You will not force me."

"Of course I won't—but—"

"Conversation over." Then the meal goes back to severe silverware. Deep down he knows she's right, which just makes him furious. All they need to make Roberta's scheme work is an attractive, personable girl holding his hand, convincing the public that there's so much about Cam to love. But he finds no bit of actor in him. Perhaps he can feign it, but he dreads the moments alone when he has to face the emptiness of a false relationship.

Emptiness.

That's what people believe is inside him. A great void. And if he can't find a soul mate among the girls paraded before him, does that mean they're right, and he has no soul?

"Incomplete," he says. "If I'm whole, why do I feel like I'm not?" And as usual, Roberta has a calming platitude intended to ease his mind, but as time goes on her rote wisdom leaves him flat and disappointed.

"Wholeness comes from creating experiences that are solely yours, Cam," she tells him. "Live your life and soon you'll find the lives of those who came before won't matter. Those who gave rise to you mean nothing compared to what you are."

But how can he live his life when he's not convinced he has one? The attacks in the press conference still plague him. If a human being has a soul, then where is his? And if the human soul is indivisible, then how can his be the sum of the parts of all the kids who gave rise to him? He's not one of them, he's not all of them, so who is he?

His questions make Roberta impatient. "I'm sorry," she tells him, "but I don't deal in the unanswerable."

"So you don't believe in souls?" Cam asks her.

"I didn't say that, but I don't try to answer things that don't have tangible data. If people have souls, then you must have one, proved by

the mere fact that you're alive."

"But what if there is no 'I' inside me? What if I'm just flesh going through the motions, with nothing inside?"

Roberta considers this, or at least pretends to. "Well, if that were the case, I doubt you'd be asking these questions." She thinks for a moment. "If you must have a construct, then think of it this way: Whether consciousness is implanted in us by something divine, or whether it is created by the efforts of our brains, the end result is the same. We *are*."

"Until we are not," Cam adds.

Roberta nods. "Yes, until we are not." And she leaves him with none of his questions answered.

• • •

Physical therapy has evolved into full-on training sessions with machines, free weights, and cardio. Kenny is the closest thing Cam has to a friend, unless you count Roberta and the guards who call him "sir." They talk openly about things that Roberta would probably want to monitor.

"So the great girlfriend search was a bust, huh?" Kenny asks while Cam pushes himself on the treadmill.

"We have not yet found a consort for the creature," Cam says, mimicking Roberta's accent.

Kenny chuckles. "You got a right to be choosy," he tells Cam. "You shouldn't accept anything less than what you want."

Cam reaches the end of his workout, and the machine begins its slowdown. "Even if I can't have what I want?"

"All the more reason to demand it," Kenny advises. "Because then maybe they'll get closer to the mark."

Sound logic, perhaps, although Cam suspects it will do nothing but set him up for disappointment.

That night he goes alone to the tabletop computer screen in the living room and starts digging through photo files. Most of it is random stuff—the images Roberta still tests him on, although not as frequently as before. None of it is what he's looking for. He finds a file

that features the head shots of all the girls who interviewed. Two hundred smiling, pretty faces, with attached résumés. After a while, they all begin to look alike.

"You won't find her in there."

He turns to see Roberta standing on the spiral staircase, watching him. She descends the rest of the way.

"Deleted?" he asks.

"Should be," Roberta says, "but no."

She touches the screen, logs in, and opens up files that had been locked to Cam. In just a few seconds she drags out not just one, but three photos and sighs. "Is this who you were looking for?"

Cam looks at the pictures. "Yes." The other two photos, like the one he had already seen, seem to have been taken without her knowledge. He wonders why Roberta is now willing to show him these pictures of the girl in the wheelchair, when she was so much against it before.

"Bus," says Cam. "She was on a bus."

"Her bus never made it to its destination. It was run off the road and hit a tree."

Cam shakes his head. "I didn't get that memory." Then he looks to Roberta. "Tell me about her."

OceanofPDF.com

20 · Nelson

The Juvey-cop turned parts pirate has outdone himself this time! Not one, but two AWOLs!

Nelson attributes his success to the ingenuity of his tactics. He caught the girl at a food court by posing as a resistance worker. Gullibility has always been his greatest ally. The girl's hair isn't quite red, as Divan requested, but it could be strawberry blond in a certain light. As for the boy, Nelson used the girl as bait, securing her to a drainpipe near an abandoned factory in an umber neighborhood that was known to be AWOL-infested. He waited until her cries drew someone from the dark recesses of the building, and he watched as the boy freed her. Then, from his vantage point in a building across the street, Nelson tranq'd them both as they ran.

His DNA analyzer pegged them both as known AWOLs, which is always better for his conscience than catching kids who actually had a life to go back to.

The drive back to Divan's auto dealership is filled with anticipation for Nelson. He was never an overachiever, so doing twice the job with half the effort is a rare thing indeed!

When he arrives, Divan is surprised but thrilled to see him so soon after the last delivery. "What a catch," he exclaims, and for once, doesn't even dicker—he gives Nelson the price he asks. Perhaps because Nelson doesn't ask for his trophies this time. The girl's eyes have fading purple pigment injections that are just plain ugly, and Nelson never did see the boy's eyes. He rarely covets what he doesn't see.

In a rare show of gratitude, Divan treats Nelson to dinner in the kind of restaurant he hasn't frequented in quite a while.

"Business must be picking up," Nelson comments.

"Business is business," Divan says, "but prospects are good."

Nelson can tell that the black marketeer has something on his mind. He watches and waits as Divan dips a spoon into his coffee,

stirring slowly, methodically. “At our last encounter,” Divan says, “I spoke to you of rumors, did I not?”

“Yes, but you failed to share them with me,” Nelson says, drinking his own coffee much more quickly than Divan. “Are these rumors something I’ll enjoy hearing?”

“Not at first, I’m sure. I’ve heard it spoken of more than once now. I didn’t want to bring it to your attention until I had heard it from more than one source.” He continues to stir his coffee. Not drinking, just pondering the swirling liquid. “They are saying that the Akron AWOL is still alive.”

Nelson feels the little hairs on the back of his neck rise and embed themselves in his collar.

“That’s impossible.”

“Yes, yes—you’re probably right.” Then Divan puts down his spoon. “However, did anyone actually see or identify the body?”

“I wasn’t at Happy Jack. I imagine it was a mess.”

“Exactly,” says Divan slowly. “A mess.” Then he picks up his coffee and takes a long, slow sip. “Which means that any number of things could have happened.” Then he puts down his coffee and leans closer. “I believe these rumors may be true. Do you have any idea how much the parts of the Akron AWOL would go for? People will pay obscene amounts for a piece of him.” Then he smiles. “I’ll pay you ten, maybe twenty times what I paid you for today’s catch.”

Nelson tries not to react, but he knows that by not saying anything, his greed has expressed itself. But for him, this particular moment of greed is not about money. Bringing in Connor Lassiter wouldn’t just be about the cash, it would even out a very imbalanced score.

It’s as if Divan can read his mind. “I am telling you this before any of my other suppliers. It would bring me great pleasure if *you* were the one to catch him, considering your history with him.”

“Thank you,” Nelson says, genuinely grateful for the head start.

“Word has it that there are some sizable AWOL populations in hiding. It would be wise to find those places, as there’s a good chance he’s working for the Anti-Divisional Resistance now.”

“If he’s alive, I’ll catch him and bring him to you,” Nelson tells him. “One thing, though.”

Divan raises an eyebrow. “Yes?”

Nelson levels his stare, making it clear that this is nonnegotiable, and says, “I get his eyes.”

OceanofPDF.com

Part Four

Leviathan

SURGEONS HARVEST ORGANS AFTER EUTHANASIA

by Michael Cook, May 14, 2010, BioEdge web journal

How often is this going on in Belgium and the Netherlands? Bioethics blogger Wesley Smith drew our attention to a conference report by Belgian transplant surgeons about organ procurement after euthanasia. As the doctors from Antwerp University Hospital explained in the 2006 World Transplant Congress (in a section called "economics"), they killed a consenting forty-six-year-old woman with a neurological condition and took her liver, two kidneys, and islets.

In a 2008 report, the doctors explained that three patients had been euthanased between 2005 and 2007. . . .

At the time of writing the article, the doctors were enthusiastic about the potential for organ donation in countries where euthanasia is legal. . . .

The curious thing about this is how little publicity this has received, even though the Belgian doctors published their achievement in the world's leading journal of transplant surgery. ~ *Transplantation*, July 15, 2006; *Transplantation,* July 27, 2008.

Full article is available at:

http://www.bioedge.org/index.php/bioethics/bioethics_article/8991/

OceanofPDF.com

21 · Lev

It's a very rare thing that a clapper doesn't clap, because by the time one gets to the stage of being willing to make one's own blood explosive enough to take out a whole building, that soul is far beyond the point of no return.

There had still been a spark of light in Levi Jedediah Calder, however. Enough to ignite a powerful change of heart.

The clapper who didn't clap.

It made him famous. His face was known nationwide and beyond. WHY, LEV, WHY? magazine headlines read, with his life story spread out like a centerfold, ready to be ogled and gobbled by a world greedy for dirt and personal tragedy.

"He was always the perfect son," his parents were quoted as saying more than once. "We'll never understand it." To see their teary interviews, you'd think Lev had actually blown himself up and truly was dead. Well, maybe in a way he was, because the Levi Calder he had been on the day he was sent to be tithed no longer existed.

Almost a year after his capture at Happy Jack Harvest Camp, Lev sits in a detention center rec room on a rainy Sunday morning. He is not a resident of the detention center; he's a visitor on a mission of mercy.

Across from him sits a kid in an orange jumpsuit, his arms crossed. Between them are the sorry ruins of a jigsaw puzzle left from the last person to sit at the table, one of many unfinished projects that plague this place. It's February, and the walls are halfheartedly hung with Valentine's Day decorations that are supposed to add a sense of festivity but just seem sadistic, because in an all-boys' detention center, only a select few are finding romance this year.

"So you're supposed to have something useful to say to me?" the kid in the orange jumpsuit says, all attitude, tattoos, and body odor. "What are you, like, twelve?"

"Actually, I'm fourteen."

The kid smirks. "Well, good for you. Now get out of my sight. I don't need spiritual guidance from baby Jesus." Then he reaches out and flicks up Lev's hair, which, over the past year, has grown to his shoulders in a very Jesus-like way.

Lev is not bothered. He gets this all the time. "We still have half an hour. Maybe we should talk about why you're in here."

"I'm in here because I got caught," the punk says. Then his eyes narrow, and he takes a closer look at Lev. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

Lev doesn't answer. "I would guess you're sixteen, right? You're labeled a 'divisional risk,' you know that, don't you? It means you're at risk for being unwound."

"What, you think my mother would unwind me? She wouldn't dare. Who'd pay her friggin' bills?" Then he rolls up a sleeve, revealing that the tattoos visible on his wrists go all the way up to his shoulder. Bones and brutality painted on his flesh. "Besides, who's gonna want *these* arms?"

"You'd be surprised," Lev tells him. "People actually pay extra for ink as good as yours."

The punk is taken aback by the thought, then studies Lev again. "Are you sure I don't know you? You live here in Cleveland?"

Lev sighs. "You don't know me, you just know *of* me."

Another moment, then the punk's eyes go wide with recognition. "No way! You're that tithe kid! I mean the clapper! I mean the one who didn't blow up! You were all over the news!"

"Right. But we're not here to talk about me."

Suddenly the punk seems like a different kid. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry I was an ass before. So, like, why aren't you in jail?"

"Plea bargain. Not allowed to talk about it," Lev tells him. "Let's just say talking to you is part of my punishment."

"Damn!" says the kid, grinning. "They give you a penthouse suite, too?"

"Seriously, I'm not allowed to talk about it . . . but I can listen to anything you want to tell me."

"Well, all right. I mean, if you really wanna hear it."

And then the kid launches into a confessional life story that he probably never told anyone before. It's the one positive thing about Lev's notoriety—it gets him respect among those who usually don't give it.

These kids in detention always want to know all about him, but the terms of the settlement were very clear. With so much sympathy from some people, and so much anger from others, it was "in the public's best interest" to get Lev out of the news as quickly as possible and keep him from becoming the national voice against unwinding. In the end, he was sentenced to house arrest, complete with a tracking chip embedded in his shoulder, and 520 hours of community service every year, until his eighteenth birthday. His service consisted of picking up trash in local parks and ministering to wayward youth about the ills of drugs and violent behavior. In return for the relative lightness of his sentence, he agreed to give them all the inside information he knew about clappers and other terrorist activities. That part was easy—he knew very little beyond his own clapper cell, and the other members were all dead. He was also put under a permanent gag order. He could never speak in public about unwinding, tithing, and what happened at Happy Jack. He was basically sentenced to disappear.

"We should call you the little mermaid," his brother Marcus had joked, "because they let you magically walk, in exchange for your voice."

So now every Sunday, Pastor Dan picks Lev up at Marcus's town house, and they share their own brand of spirituality with kids in juvenile detention.

At first it was painfully awkward, but within a few months Lev became very good at reaching into the hearts of strangers, figuring out what made them tick, and then defusing them before the tick became a countdown.

"The Lord works in mischievous ways," Pastor Dan once told him, taking an old adage and giving it a necessary tweak. If Lev has any heroes, they would be Pastor Dan and his brother Marcus. Marcus not just for standing up to their parents, but also for going the distance and taking Lev in, even though it got him cut off entirely from their family. They were both outcasts now from a family so rigid in their

beliefs that they'd rather pretend Marcus and Lev were dead than face the choices the two had made.

"It's their loss," Marcus often tells Lev, but he can't say it without looking away to hide the sorrow it makes him feel.

As for Pastor Dan, he's a hero to Lev for having the courage to lose his convictions without losing his faith. "I still believe in God," Pastor Dan told him, "just not a God who condones human tithing." And in tears, Lev asked if *he* could believe in that God too, never having realized he had such a choice.

Dan, who no one but Lev calls "Pastor" anymore, listed himself as a nondenominational cleric on the form they had to fill out before they began meeting with kids at the detention center.

"So then what religion are we?" Lev asks him each week as they walk in. The question has become a running joke, and each time Pastor Dan has another answer.

"We're Pentupcostal because we're sick of all the hypocrisy."

"We're Clueish, because we finally got a clue."

"We're PresbyPterodactyl, because we're making this whole thing fly against all reason."

But Lev's favorite was, "We're Leviathan, because what happened to you, Lev, is at the heart of it all."

It made him feel both terribly uncomfortable and also a little bit blessed to be at the core of a spiritual movement, even if it was only a movement of two.

"Isn't a leviathan a big, ugly monster?" he pointed out.

"Yes," said Pastor Dan, "so let's hope you never become one."

Lev is never going to become a big anything. The reason why he doesn't quite look fourteen is more than just looking young for his age. In the weeks after his capture, he endured transfusion after transfusion to clean out his blood, but poisoning his body with explosive compounds had damaged him. For weeks Lev's body was bound in puffy cotton gauze like a mummy, yet with arms stretched wide to keep him from detonating himself.

"You've been cruci-fluffed," Pastor Dan told him. At the time, Lev didn't find it very funny.

His doctor tried to mask his disdain for Lev by hiding it behind a cold, clinical demeanor.

"Even when we purge your system of the chemicals," the doctor said, "they'll take their toll." Then he'd chuckled bitterly. "You'll live, but you'll never be unwound. You have just enough damage to your organs to make them useless to anybody but you."

The damage also stunted his growth, as well as his physical development. Now Lev's body is perpetually trapped at the age of thirteen. The wage of being a clapper who doesn't clap. The only thing that will still grow is his hair—and he made a conscious decision that he would just let it grow, never again becoming the clean-cut, easily manipulated boy he had once been.

Luckily, the worst predictions didn't come true. He was told he would have permanent tremors in his hands and a slur in his speech. Didn't happen. He was told that his muscles would atrophy and he'd become increasingly weak. Didn't happen. In fact, regular exercise, while it hasn't bulked him up like some, has left him with fairly normal muscle tone. True, he'll never be the boy he could have been—but then, he would never have been that boy anyway. He would have been unwound. All things considered, this is a better option.

And he doesn't mind spending his Sundays talking to kids who, once upon a time, he would have been afraid of.

"Dude," the tattooed punk whispers, leaning over the rec room table and pushing some stray puzzle pieces to the floor. "Just tell me—what was it like at harvest camp?"

Lev looks up, catching a security camera trained on the table. There's one trained on every table, every conversation. In this way, it's not all that different from harvest camp.

"Like I said, I can't talk about it," Lev tells him. "But trust me, you want to stay clean till seventeen, because you don't want to find out."

"I hear ya," says the punk. "Clean till seventeen—that oughta be the motto." And he leans back, looking at Lev with the kind of admiration Lev doesn't feel he's earned.

When visiting hours are over, Lev leaves with his former pastor.

"Productive?" Dan asks.

"Can't tell. Maybe."

"Maybe's better than not at all. A good day's work for a nice Clueish boy."

• • •

There's a jogging path in downtown Cleveland that runs along the marina on Lake Erie. It curves around the Great Lakes Science Center and along the back side of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, where the memories of those who are notorious for rebellion far hipper than Lev's are immortalized. Lev jogs past it every Sunday afternoon, wondering what it must be like to be both famous and infamous, yet more adored than hated, more admired than pitied. He shudders to think what type of museum exhibit would feature him, and hopes he never finds out.

It's relatively warm for February. Temperatures in the forties. Rain instead of snow that morning, and a dreary afternoon drizzle instead of flurries. Marcus runs along with him, winded, his breath coming in puffs of steam.

"Do you have to run so fast?" he calls after Lev. "It's not a race. And anyway, it's raining."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"You could slip and lose control—there are still slushy spots."

"I'm not a car."

Lev splashes through a slush puddle, splattering Marcus, and grins while his brother curses. Years of fast food and endlessly hitting the books in law school has left Marcus not exactly flabby, but certainly out of shape.

"I swear, if you keep showing me up, I won't run with you anymore. I'll call the feds back in. They always keep up with you."

Ironically, it had been Marcus's idea that Lev begin an exercise routine once he was released into his brother's custody. In those early days of recovery, when his blood was still poisoned, just getting up and down the stairs in Marcus's town house was a workout for Lev—but Marcus had the vision to see that the rehabilitation of Lev's soul was closely tied to rehabilitating his body. For many weeks it had been Marcus pushing Lev to cover just one more block. And yes, when he

first began, there were G-men escorting him. At first they escorted him everywhere on his Sundays out, perhaps to show that there was no leniency to house arrest. Eventually they began to trust the tracking chip and allowed Lev to be out without an official escort, as long as either Dan or Marcus was with him.

"If I have a heart attack, it'll have your name all over it!" Marcus calls from farther back.

Lev was never a distance runner. Once upon a time, he was all about baseball; a real team player. Now a more individual sport suits him.

As the rain gets heavier, he stops, only halfway through the run, and lets Marcus catch up with him. They buy Aquafina from a die-hard vendor outside the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, who'll probably still be selling bottled water and Red Bull as the world is ending.

Marcus catches his breath as he drinks, then mentions casually, "You got a letter from Cousin Carl yesterday."

Lev holds his reaction inside, giving no outward indication that this is any big deal. "If it came yesterday, why are you telling me today?"

"You know how you get."

"No," Lev says a bit coldly. "Tell me how I get."

But Marcus doesn't have to, because Lev knows exactly what he means.

The first letter from Cousin Carl was a complete mystery at first, until Lev realized it was a coded message from Connor. With the possibility that Lev's mail is being monitored by one government agency or another, it was the only way Connor could get him a message and hope that Lev was clever enough to figure it all out. One arrives every few months, always postmarked from someplace different, so it can't be traced back to the Graveyard.

"So what does he say?" Lev asks Marcus.

"It's addressed to you. Believe it or not, I don't read your mail."

When they arrive home, Marcus hands the letter to him but holds it out of reach for a moment. "Promise me you won't go into some black-hole brooding funk where you sit and do nothing but play video games for a week."

"When do I ever do that?"

Marcus just gives him his "Are you kidding me?" scowl. Fair enough. Being under house arrest leaves Lev with little to do to occupy his time. But it's true that hearing from Connor always gets him thinking, and thinking gets him spiraling, and spiraling sends him to places it would be better not to go.

"It's a part of your life you need to leave behind you," Marcus reminds him.

"You're right, and you're wrong, " Lev tells him. He doesn't try to explain himself, because he's not even sure what he means, except to know that it's true. He opens the letter. The handwriting is the same, but he suspects it's not Connor's, to prevent it from being analyzed and linked to him. The paranoia that engulfs them has no end.

Dear Cousin Levi,

A belated birthday card for you. I know fourteen means more to you than to most, what with the things you've been through. The ranch has been busy. The big beef companies keep threatening to take us over, but it hasn't happened yet. We got a business plan that could save us from that, should it come to pass.

Hard work since I took over the ranch, and not much help from the neighbors. Wish I could just up and leave it, but who could handle these ranch hands but me?

We know of your current situation, and how you can't come visit. Wouldn't want you to. A lot of mad cow going on around here. Best to stay away and hope for the best.

Take care, and say hello to your brother for us. He's almost as much of a lifesaver as you.

Sincerely,

Cousin Carl

Lev reads the letter four times, trying to parse out the various possible meanings. The Juvies' looming threat to take the place out. The difficulty of running a sanctuary without enough help from the resistance. Lev's daily life has grown so distant from that underworld of desperate souls, hearing about it is like listening to ice crack beneath his feet. It makes him want to run—anywhere. Run to Connor, or run away from him. He doesn't know which direction, only that he can't stand running in place. He wishes he could write back but knows how foolhardy that would be. It's one thing receiving a random letter from a generic "cousin," but sending one to the Graveyard might as well be painting a target on Connor's back. To Lev's frustration, communication with "Cousin Carl" can only be one-way.

"How are things on 'the ranch'?" Marcus asks.

"Troubled."

"We do what we can do, right?"

Lev nods. Marcus is no slouch when it comes to the resistance. He volunteers time pulling AWOLs off the street and getting them to safe houses, and gives a healthy share of the money he makes as a legal assistant to the cause.

He hands Marcus the letter to read, and Marcus seems as bothered by it as Lev does. "We'll have to wait and see how it all shakes out."

Lev paces the living room. There are no bars on his window. Still, they might as well have put him in solitary for the sudden claustrophobia he feels.

"I should speak out against unwinding," Lev says, dispensing with all their coded talk. There's nobody listening anymore anyway. Now that his life has settled into this reclusive version of normal, surveillance feels like a nonissue. The Juvey-cops have better things to do these days than to keep their eyes on a kid who's not doing anything but hanging around his brother's house, trying to disappear.

"If I speak up, people will listen to me—they had sympathy before, didn't they? They'll listen!"

Marcus slaps the letter down on the table. "For a kid who's been through as much as you, you're still so damn naive! People don't have

sympathy for you—they have sympathy for the little kid who became a clapper. They look at you like you're the one who killed him."

"I'm tired of sitting here and doing nothing!" Lev storms into the kitchen, trying to distance himself from the truth in Marcus's words, but Marcus follows him.

"You're not doing nothing—you still have your weekend ministries with Dan."

The thought of it just makes Lev furious. "That's my punishment! You think I like being partners with the Juvey-cops? Keeping kids in line for them?" If there's one thing he knows, it's that Connor would never do the Juvies' dirty work.

"You've done more than anyone to change things, Lev. It's time for you to have your own life, which is more than you could have hoped for a year ago. So if you want any of it to mean anything, live your life, and let the rest of us take over."

Lev storms past him again.

"Where are you going?"

Lev picks up a headset and game controller. "My head. You wanna follow me in there, too?"

In a moment, he's losing himself in Firepower and Magic—a game that takes him far from his life and memories—but even so, he knows Marcus has indeed followed him into his head. And so have Connor, and Risa, and Mai and Blaine, and Cleaver and CyFi, all fighting for space. He'll never lose them, he'll never leave any of them behind, and he's not even sure he wants to.

• • •

Everything changes the day the Girl Scout comes.

It's a frigid Monday morning, after another Sunday of ministering to divisional-risk kids and jogging in spite of the cold. Dan, whose car has ignition issues, stayed overnight rather than being stranded on the road on a Sunday night. He cooks breakfast while Marcus gets ready for work.

"You know I'm against unwinding, but the ADR is a little too antiestablishment for me," Dan tells Lev as he serves up scrambled

eggs. “I’m too old to rage against the system. I just whine at it.”

Lev knows he does a little more than that. He speaks out against unwinding to anyone who will listen—something Lev is not allowed to do and, according to Marcus, will do no good anyway.

“I’ve been approached by the resistance, of course,” Dan says, “but I’ve had enough of organizations for a while, no matter how good the cause. I prefer being a free-agent rabble-rouser.”

“So . . . ,” asks Lev, “what do you think I should do?”

The former pastor ponders the eggs that tenaciously cling to his spatula. “I think you should clean your room. I’ve seen it, and it appears to be unwinding itself into God knows what.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He puts down the spatula and sits beside him. “You’re fourteen, Lev. Most fourteen-year-olds aren’t actively trying to fix the world. Cut yourself some slack and try dealing with normal fourteen-year-old things. Believe me, compared to saving the world, cleaning your room will be a vacation.”

Lev picks at his eggs. “Back before everything happened, my room used to be spotless.”

“That’s not necessarily a good thing either.”

Marcus comes to sit at the kitchen table just as the doorbell rings. He sighs and looks at Lev, who has just finished eating. “Can you get it?”

Lev figures it’s Darcy, his state-appointed tutor—because even former terrorists must know their quadratic equations. She usually doesn’t come this early, though.

He opens the door to find a Girl Scout standing there, carrying a carton full of multicolored cookie boxes.

“Hi, would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies?”

“Aren’t you a little old to be a Girl Scout?” Lev asks with a smirk.

“Actually,” the girl says, “you’re never too old, and anyway, I’m only fourteen. But yes, usually it’s the younger girls who sell cookies, so you’re right in a sense. I’m helping out my younger sister, if you must know. So can I come in? It’s cold out here.”

The girl is kind of cute, and kind of funny, and Lev does have a weak spot for Samoas, as well as cute, funny girls. “Sure, come on in

—let's see what you've got."

She practically waltzes through the door and sets the box down on the dining room table, pulling out one of each variety.

"Hey, Marcus," Lev calls, "you want some Girl Scout cookies?"

"Sure," his brother calls from the kitchen. "Get me the peanut butter."

"Make that two," calls Dan.

Lev turns to the girl. "Okay, so two of the peanut butter ones, and a box of Samoas."

"Yum-yum!" she says. "The Samoas are my favorite too." She hands him the boxes. "That'll be eighteen dollars—are you sure you don't want any Thin Mints? They're our bestseller!"

"No thanks." He pulls out his wallet, pretty sure he doesn't have enough cash, but he wants to check before asking Marcus. As he looks through his wallet, the girl has time to look at him.

"I know you, don't I?" she says.

Lev suppresses a heavy sigh. Here it comes.

"Yeah—you're that guy—the clapper! Wow, I'm selling cookies to the clapper kid!"

"I didn't clap," Lev tells her flatly, and mercifully finds a twenty in his wallet and hands it to her. "Here. Thanks for the cookies. Keep the change."

But she doesn't take the money. Instead she puts her hands on her hips, continuing to look him over. "A clapper who doesn't clap. Kind of defeats the purpose, don't you think?"

"You should go now." He waves the money at her, but she still won't take it.

"Keep your money. The cookies are my gift to you."

"No. Just take the money and go."

Her eyes are locked on his now. "A clapper who doesn't clap. I imagine that would really tick off people in high places. People who put their time and money into making sure every clapper mission goes off without a hitch."

Lev suddenly gets a feeling in the pit of his stomach that goes straight down to China.

“They’re very proactive, these organizers, and a clapper who doesn’t complete his mission gives all of us a bad name.”

Then she smiles and holds out her hands wide.

“Marcus! Dan!” yells Lev. “Get down!”

“Here’s another gift,” says the girl. “Let me unwrap it for you.” And she swings her hands together.

Lev leaps over the sofa for cover as her hands connect. All it takes is a single clap. The explosion blows Lev back against the wall, and the sofa flips on top of him, pinning him there. Shattering glass, crumbling timbers—and a shooting pain in his ears so bad he’s convinced his skull has split open. Then, in a few moments, the sounds of the explosion fades, leaving behind an intense ringing in his ears, and a clear sense that the world has just ended.

Smoke begins to burn his lungs and make his eyes tear. He forces the sofa off himself, and as he looks across the room, he sees his bed, which was upstairs just a few moments ago, now lying in the living room like a shipwreck. There is no upstairs now—and there is no roof beyond that, only the cloud-filled sky, while all around him flames eagerly fight to consume the wreckage.

Dan, who was on his way out into the living room when the girl clapped, was blasted backward against the wall. A huge bloodstain in the rough shape of his body marks his impact, and now he lies a lifeless heap on the floor. Pastor Dan—the man who told Lev to run on his tithing day, the first one to visit him once he was in police custody, the man who had become more of a father to him than his own father—is dead.

“No!!”

Lev crawls over the ruins toward Dan’s body, but then sees his brother in the kitchen. A beam has fallen in the middle of the room, shattering the glass breakfast table and embedding itself in his brother’s gut. There’s blood everywhere—but Marcus is still alive. He’s conscious, and he shudders as he tries to speak, choking on blood.

Lev doesn’t know what to do, but he knows if he doesn’t clear his head enough to act, his brother will die too.

“It’s okay, Marcus, it’s okay,” he says, even though it’s not.

With all his strength, Lev lifts the beam. Marcus screams in pain, and Lev, holding the beam up with his shoulder, pushes Marcus out of the way, then lets the beam go. The whole rest of the beam comes down, taking out what little was left of the table with a loud crash. Lev reaches into Marcus's pocket, pulls out a blood-soaked phone and, praying it still works, dials 911.

• • •

Lev, covered in soot and ears still ringing, refuses his own ambulance. He insists on riding with Marcus and makes such a stink that they let him.

His left ear flutters with every sound, like a moth has found its way inside. His vision is blurry, and time itself seems to have altered. It's like Lev and Marcus have been thrust into an alternate dimension where cause and effect are all confused. Lev can't figure out if he's here because the girl blew up, or if the girl blew up because he's here.

The paramedics work on Marcus as they speed to the hospital, injecting him with God knows what.

"L-L-Lev," Marcus says, his eyes struggling to stay open.

Lev grabs his hand, sticky and brown from drying blood. "I'm here."

"Keep him awake," the paramedic tells him. "We don't want him to go into shock."

"L-listen to me," Marcus says, fighting to get the words out. "Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"They'll want to . . . to give me stuff. Unwind stuff."

Lev grimaces to prepare himself. He knows what Marcus will say. Marcus would rather die than get parts from Unwinds.

"They're gonna . . . they're gonna wanna give me kidneys . . . a liver . . . whatever . . . parts from Unwinds . . ."

"I know, Marcus, I know."

Then he opens his half-shut eyes wider, locks his gaze on Lev, and grips Lev's hand more tightly.

"*Let them!*" he says.

"What?"

“Let them do it, Lev. I don’t wanna die. Please, Lev,” Marcus begs. “Let them give me unwound parts. . . .”

Lev squeezes his brother’s hand. “Okay, Marcus. Okay.” And he cries, thankful that his brother didn’t just condemn himself to death, and hating himself for feeling that way.

• • •

Lev is examined thoroughly and told that he has a broken eardrum, various lacerations and contusions, and possibly a concussion. They bandage his wounds, which are minor, put him on antibiotics, and hold him for observation. He hears no word of Marcus, who was rushed into an operating room the moment they arrived. Aside from the nurse taking his pulse and blood pressure every hour, there’s no one to visit Lev but the police, who have questions, questions, and more questions.

“Did you know the girl who perpetrated this attack?”

“No.”

“Did you recognize her from your clapper training?”

“No.”

“Was she a part of your clapper cell?”

“I told you I didn’t know her!”

And of course, the stupidest question of all:

“Do you know any reason why they would target you?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She told me it was retribution for not clapping—that the people in charge weren’t happy.”

“And who are the people in charge?”

“I don’t know. The only ones I ever knew were a bunch of other kids who are dead now because they all blew up, okay? I never met anyone in charge!”

Satisfied, but not really, the police leave. Then the FBI shows up and asks him the same questions the police did—and still no one will tell him anything about Marcus.

Finally, later in the afternoon, during one of her routine checks, his attending nurse takes pity on him.

“I was told not to speak to you about your brother, but I’m going to anyway.” Then she sits in a chair close to him, keeping her voice down. “He had a lot of internal damage. But luckily, we happen to have one of the best-equipped organ lockers in the state. He received a new pancreas, liver and spleen, and a sizeable segment of small intestine. He had a punctured lung, and rather than letting it heal, your parents opted to replace that, too.”

“My parents? They’re here?”

“Yes,” the nurse said. “They’re in the waiting room. Would you like me to get them?”

“Do they know I’m here?” Lev asks.

“Yes.”

“Did they ask to see me?”

She hesitates. “I’m sorry, hon, they didn’t.”

Lev looks away, but there’s nothing to look at. The TV in his hospital room has been disconnected, because there’s so much coverage of the explosion. “Then I don’t want to see them.”

The nurse pats his hand and offers him an apologetic smile. “Sorry there’s so much bad blood there, hon. I’m sorry all this had to happen to you.”

He wonders if she knows the whole of it, and figures that she does. “I should have realized they’d come after me eventually. The clappers, I mean.”

The nurse sighs. “Once you get wound in with bad people, the unwinding never ends.” Then she catches herself. “I’m sorry—that was a very unfortunate choice of words, wasn’t it? I should just sew my lips shut right now.”

Lev forces a smile. “It’s okay. Once you’ve almost blown up twice, you’re not so sensitive about word choices.”

She smiles at that.

“So what happens now?”

“Well, I understand your brother is your legal guardian. Is there anyone else who might come forward to help you? Somewhere else you can go?”

Lev shakes his head. Pastor Dan was the only other person he could count on. He can’t even think of Dan now. It simply hurts too much.

"I was under house arrest. I can't go anywhere without permission from the Juvenile Authority, even if there was someone to go with."

The nurse stands up. "Well, that's way out of my department, hon. Why don't you just relax for now? I know they want to keep you overnight—it can all be sorted out in the morning."

"Could you maybe tell me what room my brother's in?"

"He's still in recovery," she tells him, "but as soon as they assign him a room, I promise you'll be the first to know." She leaves, and in comes a detective, with more ways to ask the same questions.

• • •

True to her word, the nurse tells him that Marcus is in room 408, and so after dark, when all the questioning is over and the halls have quieted, Lev ventures out of his room, ignoring the aches that fill most of his body. Just outside his door, he sees that the cop assigned to guard him is down the hall, flirting with one of the younger nurses. Lev quietly slips away to visit Marcus.

As he pushes open the door to room 408, the first thing he sees is his mother sitting in a chair, her eyes fixed on Marcus, who is unconscious and intubated, and connected to a hissing breathing machine. His father is there too, his hair looking a little grayer than it did a year ago. Lev feels tears threatening to rise, but he wills them away, sucking his emotions in and locking them tight.

His mother sees him first. She reaches over to get his father's attention. They look at each other for a moment, sharing whatever pseudo-telepathy married couples have. Then his mother stands, crosses to Lev, and never once looking at him, hugs him awkwardly, then leaves the room.

His father doesn't look at him either. Not at first anyway. He just looks to Marcus, watching his chest rise and fall in a slow, steady, machine-regulated rhythm.

"How is he?" Lev asks.

"He's in an induced coma. They said they'll keep him like this for three days, so the nanos can speed the healing."

Lev has heard that the pain of nano-healing is unbearable. It's best that Marcus sleeps through it. Lev is certain that his parents gave Marcus all tithed organs. The most expensive. He knows this, but he won't ask.

Finally his father looks at him. "Are you satisfied now? Are you happy with the results of your actions?"

Lev has imagined this conversation between him and his father a hundred times. In each of those mental confrontations, Lev has always been the one making accusations, not the other way around. How dare he? How *dare* he? Lev wants to lash out, but he refuses to take the bait. He says nothing.

"Do you have any idea what you've put this family through?" his father says. "The shame? The ridicule?"

Lev can't maintain his silence. "Then maybe you shouldn't surround yourself with people as judgmental as you."

His father looks to Marcus again. "Your brother will come home with us," he decrees. And since any guts that Marcus now has have been paid for by their father's money, he won't have much of a choice.

"And me?"

Again, his father won't look at him. "My son was tithed a year ago," he says. "That's the son I choose to remember. As for you, you can do as you please. It's not my concern." And he says no more.

"When Marcus wakes up, tell him I forgive him," Lev says.

"Forgive him for what?"

"He'll know."

And Lev leaves without saying good-bye.

Farther down the hallway, he spots his mother again, and other members of his family, in the fourth-floor waiting room. A brother, two sisters, and their husbands. In the end, they came for Marcus. None of them are there for him. He hesitates, wondering if he should go in there. Will they behave like his father, bitter, rigid, and cold—or like his mother, offering a pained hug, yet refusing to look at him?

Then, in that moment of indecision, he sees one of his sisters bend down and pick up a baby. It's a new nephew Lev never even knew he had.

And the baby is dressed all in white.

Lev races back to his room, but even before he gets there, he feels the eruption begin. It starts deep in his gut, sobs rising with such unexpected fury, his abdomen locks in a cramp. He must struggle the last few feet to his room doubled over, barely able to catch his breath as the tears burst from his eyes.

Somewhere deep, deep down in the most irrational corner of Lev's mind—perhaps the place where childhood dreams go—he held out a secret hope that he might actually be taken back. That he might one day be welcomed home. Marcus had told him to forget about it—that it would never happen, but nothing could wipe out that stubborn hope that hid within him. Until today.

He climbs into his hospital bed and forces his face into his pillow as the sobs crescendo into wails. A full year's worth of suppressed heartache pours forth from his soul like Niagara, and he doesn't care if he drowns in the killing whiteness of its churning waters.

• • •

Lev wakes without ever remembering having slept. He knows he must have, because there's morning light streaming into the room.

"Good morning, Lev."

He turns his head toward the voice a little too sharply, and the room spins around him. An aftereffect of the explosion. His ears are still ringing, but at least the flutter in his left ear has settled down.

Sitting in a chair near the foot of his bed is a woman a little too well-dressed to be part of the hospital staff.

"Are you FBI? Homeland Security? Are you here to ask me more questions? Because I don't have any more answers."

The woman chuckles slightly. "I'm not with any government agency. I represent the Cavenaugh Trust. Have you heard of it?"

Lev shakes his head. "Should I have?"

She hands him a colorful brochure, and as he looks at it, he gets a shiver.

"It looks like a harvest camp brochure."

"Hardly," she says, clearly insulted. The right response, as far as Lev is concerned. "To put it simply," she tells him, "the Cavenaugh trust is

a whole lot of money, set aside by what was once a very wealthy family to help wayward youth. And we can think of few youth as wayward as you."

She gives him a twisted little smile, thinking herself funny. She's not.

"Be that as it may," she says, "we understand you have no place to go once you're released, and rather than leave you at the mercy of Child Protective Services, who certainly cannot protect you from any future clapper attacks, we are prepared to offer you a place to live—with the full approval of the Juvenile Authority, of course—in exchange for your services."

Lev pulls his knees up beneath his covers and shrinks away from her. He doesn't trust well-dressed people who make offers with strings attached. "What kind of services?"

She smiles at him warmly. "Just your presence, Mr. Calder. Your presence and your winning personality."

And although he can't think of anything that his personality has won, he says, "Sure, why not?" Because he realizes he has absolutely nothing left to lose. He thinks back to the days after he left CyFi, and before he arrived at the Graveyard. Dark days, to be sure, but punctuated by a bit of light when he found himself on a reservation, taken in by People of Chance. The Chance folk had taught him that when you have nothing to lose, there's no such thing as a bad roll of the dice. And then something occurs to him. Something that has been in the back of his mind for a while, but today has risen to the forefront.

"One thing, though," Lev says.

"Yes?"

"I want to have my last name legally changed. Can you do that?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Of course, if that's what you want. May I ask what you would like to change it to?"

"It doesn't matter," he tells her. "Just as long as it's not Calder."

OceanofPDF.com

22 · Trust

There's a home on a street in northern Detroit. It is now the official legal residence of one Levi Jedediah Garrity. It's a small home, but adequate, and comes through the generosity of the Cavenaugh trust, dedicated to helping wayward youth. There is a full-time valet to take care of Lev's needs, and a new tutor to take care of his lessons. The trust has even planted a permanent rent-a-cop out front to deter any unwanted guests and suspicious solicitors. No clappers are getting anywhere near the front door here.

It would be a perfect situation for Lev, except for the fact that he doesn't actually live there. True, there's that subcutaneous tracking chip embedded in his neck that swears he does, but the chip was easily compromised. Now the chip can ping out a signal from wherever they want Lev to appear to be.

No one knows he's being brought to the Cavenaugh mansion, almost forty miles away.

The Cavenaugh mansion is a behemoth of a building resting on seventy-five secluded acres in Lake Orion, Michigan. It was designed to look like Versailles and was built with motor money in the days before the American automotive industry had done its own version of clapping and applauded itself into nonexistence.

Most people don't know the mansion is still there. They're mostly right, because it's barely there at all. Exposure to the elements all these years has left it one storm short of surrender.

The mansion served as the Midwest headquarters for the Choice Brigade during the Heartland War, until it was captured and became headquarters for the Life Army. Apparently both the Lifers and Choicers saw great value in having their own personal Versailles.

The place was under attack constantly until the day the Unwind Accord ended all battles, putting forth the worst possible compromise and yet the only one both sides could agree to: sanctity of life from

conception to thirteen, with the option of unwinding teenagers whose lives were deemed to have been a mistake.

For many years after the war, the Cavenaugh mansion lay crumbling, too expensive to repair yet too large to tear down, until Charles Cavenaugh Jr., to assuage his guilt at still having old money in new times, donated the mansion to a trust fund, which was owned by another trust fund, which was laundered through yet another trust fund, which was owned by the Anti-Divisional Resistance.

OceanofPDF.com

23 · Lev

Charles Cavenaugh Jr. meets Lev personally at the entrance of the crumbling mansion. He's dressed like he's too rich to worry about how he's dressed. Even with the Cavenaugh family fortune long gone, Lev figures there must be enough residual wealth to keep at least his generation living elite. The only thing that betrays his allegiance to the resistance is his thinning hair. Nowadays the rich don't have thinning hair. If they do, they just replace it with someone else's.

"Lev, it's an honor to meet you!" He grasps Lev's hand with both of his, shaking it firmly and maintaining a steady eye contact that Lev finds awkward.

"Thanks. Same here." Lev isn't sure what else to say.

"I was so sorry to hear about the loss of your friend and your brother's injuries. I can't help but think if we had approached you earlier, the tragedy never would have happened."

Lev looks up at the mansion. Barely a window is intact. Birds fly through the jagged, broken panes.

"Don't let it fool you," Cavenaugh says. "She still has some life in her—and the way she appears is actually an asset. It's camouflage for anyone who tries to look too closely."

Lev can't imagine anyone looking too closely. The place is on seventy-five fenced-in acres, in the middle of a weedy field that was once a lawn, which is surrounded on all sides by dense woods. The only way to even see the mansion would be from above.

Cavenaugh pushes open a rotted door and leads Lev into what was once a grand foyer. Now the foyer has no roof. Two sets of stairs climb to the second floor, but most of the wood on the stairs has caved in, and weeds grow through cracks in the floor, pushing up the marble tiles, making it randomly uneven.

"This way." Cavenaugh leads him deeper into the ruined building, down a dim hallway in equally awful condition. The smell of mildew makes the air feel gelatinous. Lev is about to conclude that

Cavenaugh is a madman and run in the other direction when the man unlocks a heavy door in front of them, swinging it open to reveal a grand dining hall.

"We've restored the north wing. For now it's all we need. Of course, we've had to board all the windows—lights at night in an abandoned ruin would be way too conspicuous."

The place is nowhere near in the condition it must have once been in. There's still peeling paint, and water stains on the roof, but it's far more livable than the rest of the sprawling estate. The dining hall has two mismatched chandeliers that were probably salvaged from other areas of the mansion. Three long tables and benches suggest that a lot of people are served their meals here.

At the far end of the room is a huge fireplace, and above it a full-length portrait, larger than life. At first Lev takes it to be a painting of one of the Cavenaughs as a boy, until he looks more closely.

"Wait—is that . . . me?"

Cavenaugh smiles. "A good likeness, isn't it?"

As he crosses toward it, Lev can see how good a likeness it really is. Or at least a fine rendering of how he looked a year ago. In the portrait, he's wearing a yellow shirt that seems to glow like gold. In fact, the portrait is painted so that his skin gives off a sort of divine radiance. The expression on his painted face speaks of wisdom and peace—the kind of peace Lev has yet to find in life—and at the base of the portrait are tithing whites metaphorically trampled beneath his feet.

His first reaction is to laugh. "What's this all about?"

"It's about the cause you fought for, Lev. I'm pleased to say we've picked up where you left off."

On the mantel just below the portrait are everything from flowers to handwritten notes, to bits of jewelry and other trinkets.

"These things spontaneously began to appear after we put up the portrait," Cavenaugh explains. "We didn't expect it, but maybe we should have."

Lev still struggles to process this. Again, all he can do is giggle. "You're joking, right?"

Then off to his right, at a doorway to an adjacent hallway, a woman calls out to them. "Mr. Cavenaugh, the natives are getting restless. Can I let them in?"

Lev can see kids craning to see around the rather heavyset woman.

"Give us a moment, please," Cavenaugh tells her, then smiles at Lev. "As you can imagine, they're very excited to meet you."

"Who?"

"The tithes, of course. We held a contest, and seven were chosen to personally greet you."

Cavenaugh talks like these are all things Lev should already know. It's all too much for him to wrap his mind around. "Tithes?"

"Ex-tithes, actually. Rescued before their arrival at their respective harvest camps."

Then something clicks, and it dawns on Lev how this is possible. "Parts pirates—the ones who target tithes!"

"Oh, there are certainly parts pirates," Cavenaugh says, "but to the best of my knowledge, none of them have taken any tithes. It's a good cover story, though. Keeps the Juvenile Authority barking up the wrong tree."

The idea that tithes are being rescued rather than sold on the black market is something that has never occurred to Lev.

"Are you ready to meet our little squad of ambassadors?"

"Sure, why not."

Cavenaugh signals the woman to let them in, and they enter in an orderly procession that doesn't hide the high-voltage excitement in their step. They're all dressed in bright colors—intentionally so. Not a bit of white in the whole bunch. Lev just stands there dazed as they greet him one by one. A couple of them just stare and nod their heads, too starstruck to say anything. Another shakes his hand so forcefully Lev's shoulder has to absorb the shock. One boy is so nervous, he stumbles and nearly falls at Lev's feet, then goes beet red as he steps away.

"Your hair is different," one girl says, then panics like she's gravely insulted him. "But it's good! I like it! I like it long!"

"I know everything about you," another kid announces. "Seriously, ask me anything."

And although Lev is a bit creeped out by the thought, he says, "Okay, what's my favorite ice cream?"

"Cherry Garcia!" the kid says without the slightest hesitation. The answer is, of course, correct. Lev's not quite sure how to feel about it.

"So . . . you were all tithes?"

"Yes," says a girl in bright green, "until we were rescued. We know how wrong tithing is now."

"Yeah," says another. "We learned to see the way you see!"

Lev finds himself giddy and caught up in their adoration. Not since his days as a tithe has he felt "golden." After Happy Jack, everyone saw him either as a victim to be pitied or a monster to be punished. But these kids revere him as a hero. He can't deny that after all he's been through, it feels good. Really good.

A girl in screaming violet can't contain herself and throws her arms around him. "I love you, Lev Calder!" she cries.

One of the other kids pulls her off. "Sorry, she's a little intense."

"It's okay," Lev says, "but my name's not Calder anymore. It's Garrity."

"After Pastor Daniel Garrity!" the know-it-all kid blurts. "The one who died in the clapper blast two weeks ago." The kid is so proud that he has all the information down, he doesn't realize how raw Dan's death still is for Lev. "How's your broken eardrum, by the way?"

"Getting better."

Cavenaugh, who has been standing back, now steps in to gather them and send them on their way. "That's enough for now," he tells them. "But you'll all get your chance to have a personal audience with Lev."

"Audience?" Lev says, chuckling at the thought. "Who am I, the pope?" But no one else is laughing—and it occurs to him that his inside joke with Pastor Dan has actually become a reality. All these kids are Leviathan.

• • •

Sixty-four. That's how many ex-tithes are being sheltered and given sanctuary in the Cavenaugh mansion. It gives Lev a hope he hasn't felt

since the passage of the Cap-17 law, which turned out to be as many steps backward as it was forward.

"Eventually we'll give them new identities and place them with families we trust to kept their secret," Cavenaugh tells Lev. "We call it the Wholeness Relocation Program."

Cavenaugh gives Lev the grand tour of the reclaimed north wing. On the walls are framed photos and news clippings about Lev. A banner in one hallway proclaims they should all LIVE LIKE LEV! His giddiness begins to turn to butterflies in his stomach. How can he live up to all this buildup? Should he even try?

"Don't you think it's kind of . . . overkill?" he asks Cavenaugh.

"We've come to realize that by pulling these kids from their tithing, we've removed from them the focus of their lives; the one immutable thing they believed in. We needed to fill that space, at least temporarily. You were the natural candidate."

Stenciled on the walls are quotes and expressions attributed to Lev. Things like "To celebrate an undivided life is the finest goal of all," and "Your future is 'wholly' yours." They are sentiments he agrees with, but they never came out of his mouth.

"It must feel strange to be the focus of such lofty attention," Cavenaugh says to him. "I hope you approve of how we've used your image to help these children."

Lev finds himself in no position to approve, or disapprove, or even to judge the wisdom of it. How do you judge the brightness of a light when you're the source? A spotlight can never see the shadows it casts. All he can do is go with it, and take his place as some sort of spiritual figure. There are worse things. Having experienced several of them, there is no question that this is better.

On his second day there, they begin to arrange his personal audiences with the ex-tithes—just a few a day so as not to overwhelm him. Lev listens to their life stories and tries to give advice, much the same way he did for the incarcerated "divisional risk" kids he used to visit on Sundays with Pastor Dan. For these kids, though, no matter what Lev says, they take it as divinely inspired. He could say the sky is pink, and they would find some mystical, symbolic meaning to it.

"All they want is validation," Cavenaugh tells him, "and validation from you is the greatest gift they could hope for."

By the end of the first week, Lev has settled into the rhythm of the place. Meals don't begin until he arrives. He's usually called on to say a nondenominational grace. His mornings are spent in audiences, and in the afternoon, he's allowed time to himself. He's encouraged by Cavenaugh and the staff to write his memoirs, which feels like an absurd request of a fourteen-year-old, but they're completely serious. Even his bedroom is absurd—a kingly chamber far too large for him, and one of the few that has an actual window to the outside that isn't boarded over. His room is larger than life, his image larger than life and death combined, and yet all these things only serve to make him feel increasingly small.

And to make it worse, at each meal he is faced by that portrait. The Lev they believe he is. He can fill that role for sure, but the eyes of that portrait, which follow him through the room, carry an accusation. *You are not me,* those eyes say. *You never were, you never will be.* But still flowers and notes and tributes appear on the mantel beneath the painting, and Lev comes to realize that it isn't just a portrait . . . it's an altar.

• • •

During his second week, he's called in to greet new arrivals—the first since his own arrival. They're fresh off the hijacked van, and all they know is that they've been kidnapped and tranq'd. They do not yet know by whom.

"It would be our wish," Cavenaugh tells him, "that you be the first thing they see upon their unveiling."

"Why? So they can imprint on me like ducklings?"

Cavenaugh exhales in mild exasperation. "Hardly. To the best of their knowledge, you are the only one who escaped being tithed. You don't realize the visceral effect your presence has on another child slated for that same fate."

Lev is directed to the ballroom, which remains in a sorry state and is probably beyond salvation. He is sure there is some researched

psychological reason for greeting the kids here, but he doesn't really want to ask.

When he gets there, the two new arrivals are already there. A boy and a girl. They've been tied to chairs and blindfolded, making it clear what Cavenaugh means by "unveiling." The man is way too theatrical.

The boy sobs, and the girl tries to calm him. "It's all right, Timothy," she says. "Whatever's going on, it's going to be okay."

Lev sits across from them, feeling awkward and frightened by their fear. He knows he needs to put forth confidence and comfort, but facing a pair of terrified kidnap victims is different from facing adoring ex-tithes.

Cavenaugh is not present, but two adults in his employ stand at the ready. Lev swallows and tries to keep his hands from shaking by gripping the arms of his chair. "Okay, you can take off their blindfolds."

The boy's eyes are red from crying. The girl is already looking around, surveying the situation.

"I'm really sorry we had to do it this way," Lev says. "We couldn't risk you getting hurt, or figuring out where you were being taken. It was the only way to safely rescue you."

"Rescue us?" says the girl. "Is that what you call this?"

Lev tries to deflect the accusation in her voice, but can't. He forces himself to hold eye contact the way Cavenaugh does, hoping he can sell it as confidence.

"Well, it might not feel that way at the moment, but yeah, that's exactly what we've done."

The girl scowls in absolute defiance, but the boy gasps, and his wet eyes go wide.

"You're him! You're that tithe who became a clapper! You're Levi Calder!"

Lev offers a slim, apologetic smile, not even bothering to correct the last name. "Yes, but my friends call me Lev."

"I'm Timothy!" the boy volunteers. "Timothy Taylor Vance! Her name is Muh—Muh—I can't quite remember, but it starts with an *M*, right?"

"My name is my business and will stay my business," she says.

Lev looks at the little cheat sheet he'd been given. "Your name is Miracolina Roselli. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miracolina. Do you go by Mira?"

Her continuing glare makes it clear that she doesn't. "All right, Miracolina then."

"What gives you the right?" she says. It's almost a growl.

Lev forces eye contact again. She knows who he is, but she hates him. Despises him even. He's seen that look before, but it surprises him to see it here.

"Maybe you didn't hear me," Lev says, getting a little bit angry. "We just saved you."

"By whose definition of 'save'?"

And for an instant, just an instant, he sees himself through this girl's eyes, and he doesn't like what he sees.

"I'm glad you're both here," he says, trying to hide the quaver in his voice. "We'll talk again." Then he signals for the adults to take the kids away.

Lev sits there in the ballroom alone for a good ten minutes. There is something about Miracolina's behavior that feels disturbingly familiar. He tries to think back to when Connor pulled him from his limo on his own tithing day. Was he that belligerent? That uncooperative? There is so much from that day that he's blocked out. At what point did he begin to realize that Connor wasn't the enemy?

He will win her over. He has to. All the ex-tithes have been turned eventually. Un-brainwashed. Deprogrammed.

But what if this girl is the exception? What then? Suddenly this whole rescue operation, which had felt like a grand and glorious idea, feels very small. And very personal.

OceanofPDF.com

24 · Miracolina

Born to save her brother's life and to be gifted back to God, Miracolina will not stand for this violation—the corruption of her sacred destiny into the profane life of a fugitive. Even her own parents became weak at the end, willing to break their pact with God and save her from her tithing. Would this please them, she wonders, for her to be captured and forced to live whole? Denied the holy mystery of the divided state?

Not only must she suffer this indignation, but she must suffer it at the hands of the boy she practically considers to be Satan incarnate. Miracolina is not a girl given to hatred and unfair judgment—but to be faced with this boy proves she is not nearly as tolerant as she had thought.

Perhaps that's why I have been put on this path, she thinks, *to humble me and make me realize that I can be a hater, just like anyone else.*

On that first day, they try to trick her by putting her in a comfortable bedroom in much better condition than most of the mansion. "You can rest here until the last effects of the tranqs wear off," says a plump, kindly woman, who also brings her a meal of corned beef and cabbage, with a tall, heady glass of root beer.

"Saint Patrick's Day, don'tcha know," she says. "Eat up, dearie. There's more if you want seconds." It's a blatant attempt to win her over. She eats, but refuses to enjoy it.

There are videos and books in her room to entertain her, but Miracolina has to laugh, because just as the harvest camp van had only happy, family-friendly movies, the titles she has to choose from here have a clear agenda as well. They're all about kids being mistreated, but rising above it, or kids empowering themselves in a world that doesn't understand them. Everything from Dickens to Salinger—as if Miracolina Roselli could possibly have anything in common with Holden Caulfield.

There are also drawers filled with clothes in bright colors—all her size, and she shudders to think that they took her measurements and prepared a wardrobe while she was unconscious. Her tithing whites have become dirty, but she won't give them the satisfaction of changing out of them.

Finally a bald middle-aged man comes in with a clipboard and a name tag that just says BOB.

"I used to be a respected psychiatrist until I spoke out against unwinding," Bob tells her after the obligatory introductions. "Being ostracized was a blessing in disguise, though, because it allowed me to come here, where I'm truly needed."

Miracolina keeps her arms folded, giving him nothing. She knows what this is all about. They call it "deprogramming," which is a polite term for undoing brainwashing with more brainwashing.

"You *used* to be respected, which means you're not anymore," she tells him, "and I don't have respect for you either."

After a brief psych evaluation, which she refuses to take seriously, Bob sighs and clicks his pen closed. "I think you'll find," he says, "that our concern for you is genuine, and we want you to truly blossom."

"I'm not a potted plant," she tells him, and hurls her glass of flat root beer at the door as it closes behind him.

She quickly discovers that her door is not locked. Another trick? She goes out to explore the halls of the mansion. She can't deny that even in her anger at having been abducted, she's curious about what goes on here. How many other kids have been torn from their tithing? How many captors are there? What are her chances of escape?

It turns out there are tons of other kids. They hang out in dorm rooms or public areas. They work to repair the unrepairable damage and rot around the mansion, and they have classes taught by other Bob-like people.

She wanders into a social area with a sagging floor and a pool table propped up with wood to keep it level. One girl glances at her, singling her out, and approaches. Her name tag says jackie.

"You must be Miracolina," Jackie says, grabbing her hand to shake, since Miracolina won't extend it. "I know it's a tough adjustment, but I think we're going to be great friends." Jackie has the look of a tithe, as

do all the other kids here. A certain cleanness and elevation above worldly things. Even though no one wears a stitch of white, they can't hide what they once were.

"Are you assigned to me?" Miracolina asks.

Jackie shrugs apologetically. "Yeah, kind of."

"Thanks for being honest, but I don't like you, and I don't want to be your friend."

Jackie, who is not a formerly respected psychiatrist, but just an ordinary thirteen-year-old girl, is clearly hurt by her words, and Miracolina immediately regrets them. She must not allow herself to become callous and jaded. She must rise above this.

"I'm sorry. It's not you I don't like, it's what they're making you do. If you want to be my friend, try again when I'm not your assignment."

"Okay, fair enough," Jackie says. "But friends or not, I'm supposed to help you get with the program, whether you like it or not."

An understanding reached, Jackie returns to her friends but keeps an eye on Miracolina as long as she's in the room.

Timothy, the boy she was kidnapped with, is in the room as well, with a former tithe who was apparently assigned to him. The two talk like they're already great friends. Clearly Timothy has "gotten with the program," and since he was not too keen on being unwound anyway, all it took to deprogram him was a change of clothes.

"How could you be so . . . so shallow?" she says to him, when she catches him alone later in the day.

"If that's what you want to call it," he says, all smiles, like he's just been given a new puppy. "But if it's shallow to want a life, then heck, I'm a wading pool!"

Deprogramming! It's enough to make her sick. She despises Timothy and wonders how anyone's lifelong faith could be traded for corned beef and cabbage.

Jackie seeks her out later in the day—after Miracolina has determined that her "freedom" ends at a locked door, which keeps all the ex-tithes in a single wing of the mansion. "The rest is still uninhabitable," Jackie tells her. "That's why we're only allowed in the north wing."

Jackie explains that their days are spent in classes designed to help them to adjust.

"What happens to the kids who fail?" Miracolina asks with a smirk.

Jackie says nothing—just looks at her like it's a concept she hasn't considered.

• • •

Within a few days, Miracolina has all she can stand of the classes. The mornings begin with a long emotional group therapy where at least one person bursts into tears and is applauded by the others for doing so. Miracolina usually says nothing, because defending tithing is frowned on by the faculty.

"You have a right to your opinion," they all say if she ever speaks out against their deprogramming. "But we're hoping you will eventually see otherwise." Which means she really doesn't have a right to an opinion.

There's a class in modern history—something few schools actually teach. It includes the Heartland War, the Unwind Accord, and everything surrounding them, right up to the current day. There are discussions about the splinter groups within many major religions that took upon themselves the act of human tithing, becoming socially sanctioned "tithing cults."

"These weren't grassroots movements," the teacher tells them. "It began with wealthy families—executives and stockholders in major corporations—as a way of setting an example for the masses, because if even the rich approve of unwinding, then everyone should. The tithing cults were part of a calculated plan to root unwinding in the national psyche."

Miracolina can't keep herself from raising her hand. "Excuse me," she tells the instructor, "but I'm Catholic and don't belong to a tithing cult. So how do you account for me?"

She thought the teacher might say, *You're the exception that proves the rule,* or something equally insipid, but she doesn't. Instead she only says, "Hmm, that's interesting. I bet Lev would love to talk to you about that."

To Miracolina, that's the worst threat the teacher could make, and she knows it. It keeps Miracolina quiet. Even so, her resistance to the resistance is well known in the mansion, and she is called in for an unwanted audience with the boy who didn't detonate.

• • •

It happens on Monday morning. She's pulled out of her intolerable therapy group and taken to a section of the mansion she hasn't seen before—escorted by not one, but two resistance workers. Although she can't be sure, she suspects at least one of them is armed. They take her to a plant-filled arboretum, all curved glass and sunshine, kept heated and restored to its former glory. In the center is a mahogany table and two chairs. He's already there, sitting in one of the chairs, the boy at the center of this bizarre hero worship. She sits across from him and waits for him to speak first. Even before he speaks, she can tell he's genuinely interested in her: the only square peg in the whole mansion who can't be whittled round.

"So what's up with you?" he says after studying her for a few moments. She's offended by the informality of the question—as if her whole stance on everything occurring in this place is a matter of "something being up." Well, today she'll make it clear to him that her defiance is more than just attitude.

"Are you actually interested in me, clapper, or am I just the bug you can't squash beneath your iron boot?"

He laughs at that. "Iron boot—that's a good one." He lifts his foot to show her the sole of his Nike. "I'll admit there may be some stomped spiders between the treads, but that's about it."

"If you're going to give me the third degree," she tells him, "let's get it over with. Best to withhold food or water; water is probably best. I'll get thirsty before I get hungry."

He shakes his head in disbelief. "Do you really think I'm like that? Why would you think that?"

"I was taken by force, and you're keeping me here against my will," she says, leaning across the table toward him. She considers spitting in his face, but decides to save that gesture as punctuation for a more

appropriate moment. “Imprisonment is still imprisonment, no matter how many layers of cotton you wrap it in.” That makes him lean farther away, and she knows she’s pushed a button. She remembers seeing those pictures of him back when he was all over the news, wrapped in cotton and kept in a bombproof cell.

“I really don’t get you,” he says, a bit of anger in his voice this time. “We saved your life. You could at least be a little grateful.”

“You have robbed me, and everyone here, of their purpose. That’s not salvation, that’s damnation.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Now it’s her turn to get angry. “Yes, you’re sorry I feel that way, everyone’s sorry I feel that way. Are you going to keep this up until I don’t feel that way anymore?”

He stands up suddenly, pushing his chair back, and paces, fern leaves brushing his clothes. She knows she’s gotten to him. He seems like he’s about to storm out, but instead takes a deep breath and turns back to her.

“I know what you’re going through,” he says. “I was brainwashed by my family to actually want to be unwound—and not just by my family, but by my friends, my church, everyone I looked up to. The only voice who spoke sense was my brother Marcus, but I was too blind to hear him until the day I got kidnapped.”

“You mean *see*,” she says, putting a nice speed bump in his way.

“Huh?”

“Too blind to *see* him, too deaf to *hear* him. Get your senses straight. Or maybe you can’t, because you’re senseless.”

He smiles. “You’re good.”

“And anyway, I don’t need to hear your life story. I already know it. You got caught in a freeway pileup, and the Akron AWOL used you as a human shield—very noble. Then he turned you, like cheese gone bad.”

“He didn’t turn me. It was getting away from my tithing, and seeing unwinding for what it is. That’s what turned me.”

“Because being a murderer is better than being a tithe, isn’t that right, clapper?”

He sits back down again, calmer, and it frustrates her that he is becoming immune to her snipes.

"When you live a life without questions, you're unprepared for the questions when they come," he says. "You get angry and you totally lack the skills to deal with the anger. So yes, I became a clapper, but only because I was too innocent to know how guilty I was becoming."

There is an intensity about him now, and a moistness to his eyes. Miracolina can tell that he is sincere, and that this is not just a show for her. Maybe he's even saying more than he meant to say. She begins to wonder if she has misjudged him, and then gets angry at herself for wondering such a thing.

"You think I'm like you, but I'm not," Miracolina says. "I'm not part of a religious order that tithes. My parents did it in spite of our beliefs, not because of it."

"But you were still raised to believe it was your purpose, weren't you?"

"My purpose was to save my brother's life by being a marrow donor, so my purpose was served before I was six months old."

"And doesn't that make you angry that the only reason you're here was to help someone else?"

"Not at all," she says a little too quickly. She purses her lips and leans back in her chair, squirming a bit. The chair feels a little too hard beneath her. "All right, so maybe I do feel angry once in a while, but I understand why they did it. If I were them, I would have done the same thing."

"Agreed," he says. "But once your purpose was served, shouldn't your life be your own?"

"Miracles are the property of God," she answers.

"No," he says, "miracles are gifts *from* God. To call them his property insults the spirit in which they are given."

She opens her mouth to reply but finds she has no response, because he's right. Damn him for being right—nothing about him should be right!

"We'll talk again when you're over yourself," he says, and signals a waiting guard to take her away.

• • •

The next day a class is added into her schedule, to keep her from having too idle a mind. It's called Creative Projection. It takes place in a classroom that was once some kind of parlor, with faded, moth-eaten portraits on peeling walls. Miracolina wonders if the stodgy faces in the paintings look down on the lessons here with approval, disapproval, or absolute indifference.

"I want you to write a story," says the teacher, a man with annoying little round glasses. Glasses! Objects of antiquity no longer needed by anyone, what with laser procedures and affordable eye-replacement surgery. There is a certain arrogance to their quaintness. As if people who choose to wear glasses feel they are somehow superior.

"I want you to write the story of you—your biography. Not the life you've lived but the life you're *going* to live. This is the biography you might write forty, fifty years from now." The teacher wanders the room, gesticulating into the air, probably imagining himself to be Plato or someone equally lofty. "Project yourselves forward. Tell me who you think you'll be. I know that'll be hard for all of you. You've never dared think of the future—but now you can. I want you to enjoy this. Be as wild as you want. Have fun with it!"

Then he sits down and leans back in his chair with his hands behind his head, very satisfied with himself.

Miracolina taps her pen impatiently on the page while the other kids write. He wants her dream future? Fine. She'll give these people something honest, even if it isn't what they want to hear.

It is years from now, she writes, *and my hands belong to a mother who lost her hands in a fire. She has four children. She comforts them, bathes them, brushes their hair, and changes their diapers with those hands. She treasures my hands because she knows how precious they are. She gets manicures weekly for me, even though she doesn't know who I was.*

My legs belong to a girl who was in a plane crash. She had been a track star, but found that my legs simply weren't built for that. For a while she mourned the loss of her Olympic dream, but then realized that my legs could dance. She learned to tango, and one day she met a prince

while dancing in Monaco, and she danced her way into his heart. They married, and now the royal couple have a grand ball every year. The highlight of the ball is her stunning tango with her prince.

With every word she writes, Miracolina is filled with deeper fury at all the possibilities stolen from her.

My heart went to a scientist on the verge of discovering a way to harness starlight and solve the world's energy needs. He was so close—but then suffered a major heart attack. Thanks to me, though, he survived and completed his life's work, making the world a better place for all of us. He even won the Nobel Prize.

Is it so strange to want to give of yourself totally and completely? If that is what's in Miracolina's heart, why should it be denied her?

And as for my mind—my memories, which are full of a loving childhood—they all went to troubled souls who had no such memories of their own. But now with that part of me in them, they are healed of the many hurts in their lives.

Miracolina turns in her paper, and the teacher, perhaps more curious about hers than anyone else's, reads it while the other kids are still writing. She watches his face, full of thoughtful expressions as he reads. She doesn't know why she should care, but she's always cared what her teachers think. Even the ones she didn't like. Then, when he's done, he comes over to her.

"Very interesting, Miracolina, but you've left out one thing."

"What?"

"Your soul," he says. "Who gets your soul?"

"My soul," she tells him with confidence, "goes to God."

"Hmm . . ." He strokes some graying whisker stubble. "So it goes to God, even if every part of your body is still alive?"

Miracolina stands firm against his questioning. "I have a right to believe that, if I want to."

"True, true. One problem with that, though. You're Catholic, isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"And you want to be unwound voluntarily."

"So?"

"Well . . . if your soul leaves this world, then voluntary unwinding is no different from assisted suicide—and in the Catholic religion, suicide is a mortal sin. Which means that by your own beliefs, you'd be going to hell."

Then he leaves her to stew with an A-minus on her essay. Minus, she assumes, due to the eternal damnation of her soul.

OceanofPDF.com

25 · Lev

Miracolina has no idea how deeply her obstinance affects him. Most kids here are either terrified of Lev, or worship him, or both—but Miracolina is neither intimidated nor reverent; she just hates him, plain and simple. It shouldn't bother him. He's gotten used to being hated—for just as his brother Marcus said, as much as the public mourned for poor, corrupted, little-boy-Lev, they also despise the "monster" that he has become. Well, he was innocent, and he was a monster, but here in the Cavenaugh mansion, none of that matters, because here he is one step short of being a god. There's a heady, awkward kind of fun to that, but Miracolina is the pin that pops the bubble.

His next encounter with her is the following week, at an Easter dance. Tithes are notoriously inept when it comes to male/female interaction. Knowing that dating and all that goes with it won't be a part of their limited future, tithes and their families don't give boy/girl stuff much attention. In fact, it's downplayed, since it would create the kind of wistful longing that a tithe should not have.

"These kids are all smart as a whip," Cavenaugh exclaims at the weekly meeting of the tithe rescue staff, "but they have the social skills of six-year-olds." It's a fair description of how Lev was on his tithing day as well, and he's not all that sure he's come much further. He's still never been on a date.

There are about twenty staff members, and Lev is the only one under thirty. Each of their faces are filled with concern that's so long-lived, it seems burned into their expressions. He wonders if their passion comes from their own experiences with unwinding. Did they, like the Admiral, unwind their own child, and come to regret the decision? Was it personal for them, or did their dedication to the cause come from a general disgust with society's status quo?

"We shall have an Easter dance," Cavenaugh proclaims from the head of the meeting table, "and encourage our ex-tithes to behave like

normal teenagers. Within reason, of course." Then he singles Lev out. "Lev, can we count on you, as our goodwill ambassador, to join in the festivities?"

Everyone waits for his answer. It bothers him that they're hanging on his response. "What if I say no?"

Cavenaugh looks at him incredulously. "Why on earth would you? Everyone loves a party!"

"Not really," Lev points out. "The last parties these kids had were their tithing parties. Do you really want to remind them of that?"

The others around the table mumble to one another, weighing what Lev has said, until Cavenaugh dismisses it. "Tithing parties are farewells," he says. "Ours will be about new beginnings. I'm counting on you to attend."

Lev sighs. "Sure." There is no challenging of ideas in the Cavenaugh mansion when those ideas come from the man who shares the mansion's name.

It is decided that the ballroom is in too poor shape for an adolescent gala, so they use the dining hall, clearing away the tables and chairs and setting up a DJ station beneath the portrait. With attendance mandatory, the entire population of ex-tithes is there.

As Lev expected, they gather by gender on either side of the room like it's a game of dodgeball, boys against girls. Everyone busies themselves drinking punch and eating cocktail weenies while stealing secret glances at the opposing team, as if being caught looking will get them disqualified.

One of the adults does his best impersonation of a DJ, and when encouragement doesn't work, he demands that everyone form a circle on the dance floor to do the Hokey Pokey. However, ten seconds into the dance, he suddenly realizes how ill-advised it is for ex-tithes to be putting various body parts in and out. The DJ becomes flustered and tries to skip right to the "you put your whole self in" part, but the kids are so amused by all this that they continue singing and dancing part by part even after the music has stopped. Ironically, it ends up being the perfect icebreaker, and when the dance music starts up again, there are actually kids dancing.

Lev is not one of them. He's more than satisfied to be an observer, in spite of the fact that he can have his pick of dance partners—although he suspects if he actually did ask one of these girls to dance, she might spontaneously combust on the spot.

But then from across the room he spots Miracolina leaning back against the wall with her arms resolutely crossed, and he decides that this is a challenge worth taking.

The moment she sees him approaching she looks away, a bit panicked, hoping he's headed toward someone else. Then she takes a visible breath when she realizes she is the subject of his attention.

"So," says Lev, as casually as he can, "you wanna dance?"

"Do you believe in the end of the world?" she responds.

Lev shrugs. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because the day after that is when I'll dance with you."

Lev smiles. "You're funny. I didn't think you had a sense of humor."

"I'll tell you what. If you run out of girls who worship the ground you walk on, you can ask me again. The answer will still be no, but I'll give you the courtesy of pretending to think about it."

"I read your essay," he tells her, which gets a nice head-snapping reaction out of her. "You have a dancing princess fantasy—don't deny it."

"My *legs* have a dancing princess fantasy."

"Well, to dance with your legs, I guess I'll have to put up with the rest of you."

"No, you won't," she says, "because not a single part of me will be here." Then she glances toward Lev's portrait, which is now weirdly lit by colorful strobe lights. "Why don't you dance with your portrait?" Miracolina suggests. "The two of you deserve each other." Then she storms out. The adults at the door try to stop her from going back to her room, but she gets past them anyway.

After she's gone, Lev hears the grumbling around him.

"She's such a loser," someone says.

Lev turns to the kid with a vengeance. It's Timothy, the boy who arrived with her. "I could say the same about you!" he snaps. "All of you!"

Then he shuts himself up before he goes too far. “No, that’s not true. But you shouldn’t be judging her.”

“Yes, Lev,” says Timothy obediently. “I won’t, Lev. I’m sorry, Lev.”

And then a shy girl, apparently less shy than all the other shy girls, steps forward. “I’ll dance with you, Lev.”

So he goes out onto the dance floor and obliges her and every other girl there with a dance, while his portrait looks down on them with its irritating gaze of holy superiority.

• • •

The next day the portrait is vandalized.

Something rude is tagged in spray paint right across the middle of it. Breakfast is delayed until the portrait can be removed. There is a spray paint can missing from the storeroom, but no smoking gun as to who could have done it. Everyone has a theory, though, and most of those theories point to the same person.

“We know it was her!” the other kids try to tell Lev. “Miracolina’s the only one here who has something against you!”

“How do you know she’s the only one?” Lev asks them. “She’s just the only one with guts enough to say it out loud.”

Out of respect for Lev’s wishes, the other kids don’t accuse her to her face, and the adults are diplomatic enough to keep their opinions to themselves.

“Perhaps we need more surveillance cameras,” Cavenaugh suggests.

“What we need,” Lev tells him, “is more freedom to express opinions. Then things like this wouldn’t happen.”

Cavenaugh is genuinely insulted. “You talk like this is a harvest camp. Everyone’s free to express themselves here.”

“Well, I guess not everyone feels that way.”

OceanofPDF.com

26 · Miracolina

After a day of being cold-shouldered by every living thing in the mansion, there's a knock on her door. She doesn't say anything, because whoever it is will just come in anyway; the bedrooms here have no locks.

The door opens slowly, and Lev steps in. There's a quickening of her heart when she sees him. She tells herself it's anger.

"If you're here to accuse me of vandalizing your portrait, I confess. I can't hide the truth anymore. I did it. Now punish me by taking away all my inspirational movies. Please."

Lev just keeps his arms limply by his side. "Stop it. I know you didn't do it."

"Oh—so you finally caught the naughty tithe?"

"Not exactly. I just know it wasn't you."

It's a bit of a relief to be vindicated, although she did take some guilty pleasure in being a prime suspect. "So what do you want?"

"I've been meaning to apologize for the way you were brought here. Tranq'd and blindfolded and all. I mean, what they're doing here is important, but I don't always agree with how they do it."

Miracolina notes that this is the first time she's heard him say "they" instead of "we."

"I've been here for weeks," she says. "Why are you telling me this now?"

Lev reaches up and flips his hair out of his eyes. "I don't know. It was just bothering me."

"Soooo . . . you're going around apologizing to every kid here?"

"No," Lev admits. "Just you."

"Why?"

He begins pacing the small room, raising his voice. "Because you're the only one who's still angry! *Why are you so angry*?"

"The only angry person in this room is you," Miracolina says, with antagonizing calm. "And there are plenty of angry kids here. Why else

would your portrait get vandalized?"

"Forget about that!" shouts Lev. "We're talking about you!"

"If you don't stop yelling, I'll have to ask you to leave. In fact, I think I'll ask you to leave anyway." She points to the door. "Leave!"

"No."

So she picks up a hairbrush and throws it at him. It beans him on the head and ricochets to the wall, where it wedges behind the TV.

"Ow!" He grabs his head, grimacing. "That hurt!"

"Good, it was supposed to."

Lev clenches his fists, growls, then turns like he's going to storm out, but he doesn't. Instead he turns back to her, unclenching his fists and holding his palms out to her, pleading like maybe he's showing off his stigmata. Well, there might be blood on his hands, but it sure isn't flowing from his palms.

"So is this how it's going to be?" he asks. "You're just going to stew and bitch and make things miserable for everyone here? Don't you want something more out of life?"

"No," she tells him, "because my life ended on my thirteenth birthday. As far as I'm concerned, from that moment on I was supposed to be a part of other people's lives. I was fine with that. It's what I wanted. It's what I still want. Why do you find that so hard to believe?"

He looks at her for a moment too long, and she tries to imagine him all dressed in white as a tithe. She could like that boy; still pure and untainted. But the kid before her now is a different person.

"Sorry," she says, not sorry at all. "I guess I failed deprogramming school." She turns her back to him and waits a few moments, knowing he's just standing there, then turns again—only to find that he's not. He has left, closing the door so quietly she didn't hear.

OceanofPDF.com

27 · Lev

Lev sits in on yet another meeting of the tithe rescue staff. He doesn't know why they include him; Cavenaugh never listens to what he says. These meetings truly make him feel like a mascot, a favorite pet. This time, however, he's determined to make them listen.

Even before they begin, Lev speaks loudly enough to get everyone's attention, stealing the floor from Cavenaugh before he has the chance to take it. "Why is the portrait of me back in the dining hall?" he asks. "It was already vandalized once—why put it back?" The question quiets everyone down and brings the room to order.

"I ordered it restored and returned," says Cavenaugh. "The comfort and focus it provides the ex-tithes is invaluable."

"I agree!" says one of the teachers. "I think it draws their focus toward the positive." Then she punctuates her remark with a brownnosing nod toward Cavenaugh. "I, for one, like it and approve."

"Well, *I* don't like it, and *I* don't approve," Lev tells them, for the first time voicing his feelings out loud. "I shouldn't be some sort of god-thing. I shouldn't be put on a pedestal. I'm not and never have been this image you're trying to make me."

There's silence around the room as everyone waits to see how Cavenaugh will react. He takes his time and finally says, "We all have our jobs here. Yours is very clear and very simple: to be an example for the other ex-tithes to follow. Have you noticed kids have been letting their hair grow? At first I thought your hair would be off-putting, but now they are modeling themselves on you. It's what they need at this juncture."

"I'm not a role model!" Lev yells. He stands up, not even realizing he's come to his feet. "I was a clapper. A terrorist! I made awful decisions!"

But Cavenaugh remains calm. "It's your *good* decisions we care about. Now sit down and let us get on with this meeting."

Lev looks around the table but sees no support. If anything, he sees them all tallying this outburst as one of his bad decisions, best forgotten. He boils with the same kind of anger that once turned him into a clapper, but he bites it back, sits down, and remains silent for the rest of the meeting.

It's only as the meeting breaks up that Cavenaugh takes his hand. Not to shake it, but to flip it over and scrutinize his fingers—or more specifically, to look under his fingernails.

"Best clean those a little better, Lev," he says. "Spray paint comes out with turpentine, I think."

OceanofPDF.com

28 · Risa

Risa does not have an Easter social. She can't even be sure which day is Easter—she's lost track of the days. In fact, she can't even be sure where she is. At first she's held by the Juvenile Authority in Tucson, then transferred in a windowless armored vehicle to another detention facility about two hours away—in Phoenix, she presumes. Here is where they send in interrogators to ask her questions.

"How many kids are in the Graveyard?"

"A bunch."

"Who sends your supplies?"

"George Washington. Or is it Abraham Lincoln? I forget."

"How often do you receive new arrivals?"

"About as often as you beat your wife."

The interrogators are infuriated by her lack of cooperation, but she has no intention of telling them anything useful. Besides, she knows they're asking her questions they already know the answers to. The questions are merely tests to see whether she'll tell the truth or lie. She doesn't do either. Instead she makes a mockery of each interrogation.

"Your cooperation might make things easier on you," they tell her.

"I don't want things easy," she responds. "I've had a hard life. I'd rather stick with what's familiar."

They let her go hungry but don't let her starve. They tell her they have Elvis Robert Mullard in custody and they're cutting him a deal for information—but she knows they're lying, because if they had him, they'd know it's not Mullard at all, but Connor.

This is how it goes for two weeks. Then one day in walks a Juvey-cop. He aims a gun at her and unceremoniously tranqs her—not in the leg, where it would hurt the least, but right in the chest, where it stings until she loses consciousness.

She awakes in a different cell. A little newer and larger, perhaps, but still a cell. She has no idea where she has been transported this

time, or why. This new cell is not at all designed for a paraplegic, and her captors have offered no help since she arrived. Not that she'd accept it if they did, but it's as if they want her to struggle over the lip of the bathroom threshold, or onto her bed, which is abnormally high —just enough to make getting into it an ordeal.

She suffers a week of food brought in by a silent guard in a rent-a-cop uniform. She knows she's no longer in the hands of the Juvenile Authority, but who her new captors are is a mystery. These new jailers ask no questions, and that concerns her the same way that Connor is always concerned by the fact that the Graveyard has never been taken out. Are they so unimportant in the grand scheme of things that the Juvenile Authority won't even torture her to get the information they want? Have they been deluding themselves into thinking they're making a difference?

All this time she's forced out thoughts of Connor, because it simply hurt too much to think about him. How horrified he must have been when she turned herself in. Horrified and stunned. Well, fine, let him be; he'll get over it. She did it for him just as much as she did it for the injured boy, because as painful as it is to admit, Risa knows she had become just a distraction to Connor. If he's truly going to lead those kids in the Graveyard like the Admiral did, he can't be giving Risa leg massages and worrying whether her emotional needs are being met. Maybe he does love her, but it's obvious there's no room in his life at this moment to pay it any more than lip service.

Risa has no idea what her future holds now. All she knows is that she must focus on that future and not on Connor, no matter how much that hurts.

• • •

A few days later Risa finally has an actual visitor: a well-dressed woman with an air of authority.

"Good morning, Risa. It's a pleasure to finally meet the girl behind the hullabaloo. "

Risa immediately decides that anyone who uses the word "hullabaloo" cannot be her friend.

The woman sits down in the single chair in the cell. It's a chair that has never been used, because it's not exactly designed for a paraplegic. In fact, it seems specifically designed *not* to be accessible to Risa, like most everything else in her cell. "I trust they've been treating you well?"

"I haven't been 'treated' at all. I've been ignored."

"You haven't been ignored," the woman tells her. "You've just been allowed some time to settle. Some time alone, to think."

"Somehow I doubt I've ever been alone. . . ." Risa throws a glance to a large wall mirror, through which she can occasionally see shadows. "So am I some sort of political prisoner?" She asks, getting right to the point. "If you're not going to torture me, do you just plan to leave me here to rot? Or maybe you're selling me to a parts pirate. At least the parts that work."

"None of those things," says the woman. "I'm here to help you. And you, my dear, are going to help us."

"I doubt that." Risa rolls away, although she can't roll very far. The woman doesn't get up from her chair. She doesn't even move; she just sits there comfortably. Risa wanted to be in control of this situation, but this woman keeps control with her voice alone.

"My name is Roberta. I represent an organization called Proactive Citizenry. Our purpose, among other things, is to do good in this world. We seek to advance the causes of both science and freedom as well as to provide a sense of spiritual enlightenment."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

Roberta smiles and pauses a moment, holding her smile before she speaks. "I'm going to have the charges against you dropped, Risa. But more importantly, I'm going to get you out of that wheelchair and give you a new spine."

Risa turns to her, filled with more mixed emotions than she can sort right now. "No, you will not! It's my right to refuse the spine of an Unwind."

"Yes, it is," Roberta says, way too calmly. "However, I firmly believe you will change your mind."

Risa crosses her arms, her belief more firm than Roberta's that she won't.

• • •

She's given the silent treatment again—but they must be getting impatient, because it's only for two days this time instead of a week. Roberta returns and sits once more in the chair designed for people who can walk. This time she has a folder with her, although Risa can't see what's inside.

"Have you given any thought to my offer?" Roberta asks her.

"I don't need to. I already gave you my answer."

"It's very noble to stand on principle and refuse an unwound spine," Roberta says. "It does, however, represent a wrongful mind-set that is neither productive nor adaptive. It's backward, actually, and it makes you part of the problem."

"I plan to keep my 'wrongful mind-set' as well as my wheelchair."

"Very well. I won't deny you your choice." Roberta shifts in her chair—perhaps a little irritated, or maybe just in anticipation. "There's someone I'd like you to meet." Then she stands and opens the door. Risa knows that whoever it is has been waiting in the other room, watching through the oneway mirror.

"You can come in now," Roberta says cheerfully.

A boy steps in cautiously. He seems sixteen or so. He has multicolored skin and multicolored streaks in his hair. At first she assumes it's some sort of extreme body modification, but she quickly realizes it's more than that. There is something profoundly wrong about him.

"Hi," he says, and smiles tentatively with perfect teeth. "I'm Cam. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Risa."

Risa backs away, her wheelchair bumping the wall. Now it strikes her exactly what she's seeing—exactly why this boy seems so "off." She has seen a news report about this creation. Her flesh starts to crawl. If it could, it would crawl right through the air vents to escape what she's seeing.

"Get that thing away from me! It's disgusting! Get it away!"

His expression mirrors Risa's horror. He backs away and hits the wall as well.

"It's all right, Cam," Roberta says. "You know people always have to get used to you. And she will." Roberta offers him the chair, but suddenly Cam doesn't want to be there, he wants to escape just as much as Risa does.

Risa looks to Roberta so she doesn't have to look at Cam. "I said get it out of here."

"I'm not an it," Cam insists.

Risa shakes her head. "Yes, you are." She still won't look directly at him. "Now get it out of here, or I swear I will rip every stolen part out of its body with my bare hands."

She tries not to catch his gaze, but she can't stop herself. The thing has begun to cry tears from someone else's stolen tear ducts, and it just makes her angry.

"Dagger plunged deep," he says. Risa has no idea what he's talking about but doesn't really care.

"Get it out of my sight," she yells at Roberta, "and if you have any decency in you at all, you'll kill it!"

Roberta looks at her sternly, and then turns to Cam. "You can go, Cam. Wait outside for me."

Cam quickly, awkwardly, leaves, and Roberta closes the door. Now she's fuming. If Risa can take anything positive out of this, it's that she's gotten the better of Roberta.

"You're a cruel girl," Roberta says.

"And you're a monster to create a thing like that."

"History will be the judge of who we are, and what we've done." And then she puts a piece of paper down on the table. "This is a consent form. Sign it and you can have a new working spine by the end of the week."

Risa picks it up, tears it to shreds, and throws the pieces in the air. Roberta must have been expecting this, because she instantly pulls out a second consent form from her folder and slaps it down on the table.

"You *will* be healed, and you *will* make up to Cam for how badly you've treated him today."

"Not in this life, or any other."

Roberta smiles like she knows something Risa doesn't. "Well then . . . here's hoping you have a sudden change of heart." Then she

exits the room, leaving the pen and the consent form on the table.

Risa looks at the consent form long after Roberta has gone. She knows she won't sign it, but the fact that they want her to intrigues her. Why is it so important to them that her broken body be repaired? There's only one answer to that: For some reason Risa is much more important than she ever dreamed she was. Important to both sides.

OceanofPDF.com

29 · Cam

He sits in the observation room. He's been there more often than he'd like to admit, spying on Risa—although when it's officially allowed through a one-way mirror, it's not called spying. It's called surveillance.

On the other side of the glass, Risa stares at the contract Roberta put before her. Her face is stony, her jaw clenched. Finally she picks up the page . . . then folds it into a paper airplane and throws it at the mirror. Cam jolts in spite of himself. He knows she can't see him, but still she looks into the mirror at almost the right spot to make eye contact. For a moment Cam feels like she can see not only through the glass, but through him as well, and he has to look away.

He hates the fact that she hates him. He should have expected it, but still, her words hurt him deeply and make him want to hurt her back. But no. That's just the reaction of the various Unwinds in his head; kids who would lash out at the slightest provocation. He won't give in to those impulses. There are enough sensible parts of him to balance things and allow him to control those parts that threaten to disturb the peace. He reminds himself that, as Roberta has said, he is the new paradigm—the new model of what humanity could, and should, be. The world will get used to him, and in time revere him. And so will Risa.

Roberta comes into the room behind him and speaks quietly. "There's no point staying here."

"Jericho," he says. "She's a wall, but she'll crumble. I know she will."

Roberta smiles at him. "I have no doubt that you'll win her over. In fact, I suspect she'll change her mind sooner than you think."

Cam tries to read between the lines of her smile, but she reveals nothing. "Cat that ate the canary—I don't like when you keep secrets."

"No secret," Roberta tells him. "Just an undying faith in human nature. Now come, it's almost time for your photo shoot."

Cam sighs. "Another one?"

"Would you prefer a press conference?"

"A sharp stick in the eye? No thank you!"

Cam has to admit that this new approach to the media is far better than press conferences and interviews. Roberta and her friends at Proactive Citizenry have cooked up a first-class advertising campaign. Billboards, print ads, digital, the works. All just photos, but even so, the ads are powerful.

The first round of ads will feature extreme close-ups of various parts of him. An eye; streaks of his multicolored hair; the starburst of flesh tones on his forehead. Each image will be accompanied by a pithy but enigmatic caption like, "The Time Has Come," or "The Brilliant Tomorrow," with no other clue as to what's being advertised. Then, when public curiosity is piqued, they move to phase two, where the ads will feature his face, his body, and finally his whole self.

"We'll create a mystique around you," Roberta told him. "Play into their puerile fascination with the exotic until they're champing at the bit to see more."

"Striptease," Cam had said.

"An elevated version of the same concept, I suppose," Roberta admitted. "Once the ad campaign has rolled out, you will enter the public eye not as an oddity, but as a celebrity—and when you finally deign to do interviews, it will be on our terms."

"My terms," Cam corrected.

"Yes, of course. Your terms."

Now, as Cam watches Risa through the one-way glass, he wonders what could possibly make her live by his terms too. Roberta has told him that he can have anything he desires, but what if the thing he desires most is Risa choosing to be with him of her own free will?

"Cam, please—come now, or we'll be late."

Cam stands, but before he leaves, he spares one last glance through the mirror at Risa, who has struggled onto her bed. Now she lies stretched out on her back, looking morosely at the ceiling. Then she closes her eyes.

The eternally sleeping princess, thinks Cam. *But I shall free you from those poisoned brambles that surround your heart. And then you will have no choice but to love me.*

OceanofPDF.com

30 · Nelson

The Juvey-cop turned parts pirate makes a side trip to check one of his most successful traps. It is, however, in an unfortunate location. Unfortunate because it's in a field that floods during storms. Nothing's more irritating than a drowned AWOL. Except maybe disposing of one. He would rather continue searching for safe houses, with hopes of finding Connor Lassiter in one of them, but with major storms projected throughout the Midwest, checking this particular trap is worth the effort.

The trap is a piece of drainage pipe—a concrete cylinder five feet high and twenty feet long, lying in a fallow field that no one has farmed for years. Half a dozen such pipes rest in the field, surrounded by weeds—all abandoned when some public works project got canceled. It's a nice hiding spot for runaway Unwinds—and in fact, one of the tunnel segments has a store of canned food right in the middle. The inside surface of that same cylinder, however, is painted with super-adhesive resin that sticks to clothes and flesh with such tenacity that anyone caught in the pipe might as well be nailed to the concrete. It tickles Nelson that he can catch Unwinds the way other people catch roaches.

Sure enough, there's a kid stuck in the pipe. "Help me!" the boy shouts, kind of like the Fly caught in the spiderweb. "Help me, please!" The kid is scrawny and acne-ridden, with crooked teeth yellowed from chewing tobacco or just bad genetics. Either way, he's not a prime specimen and won't fetch much on the black market. His hair is plastered with glue, although Nelson suspects it doesn't look much better clean.

"My God! What happened to you?" Nelson says, feigning concern.

"It's like glue or somethin'! I can't get out!"

"Okay," Nelson says, "I think I can get you out of there. I have some adhesive remover in the van." Actually he already has it with him. He pretends to jog away and jog back, then soaks a foul-smelling rag with

the fluid, climbs into the tunnel, and begins dabbing the kid's clothes and skin. Bit by bit the boy comes free from the adhesive.

"Thanks, mister," says the kid. "Thanks a lot!" Nelson climbs out and waits at the mouth of the tunnel as the gooey, glue-covered kid slides himself out, just as nasty as a baby being born. Then, as he comes into the light of day, something finally occurs to this dim bulb. "Hey, wait a second . . . why would someone have that there adhesive remover stuff unless—"

Nelson doesn't give him the chance to finish his thought. He grabs the boy, wrenches his arms behind his back, and tugs a plastic cable tie around his wrists. Then Nelson pushes him to the ground and pricks him with the DNA reader.

"William Yotts," Nelson announces, and the kid groans. "AWOL for four days. Not too good at hiding, are ya?"

"You ain't takin' me in," Yotts screams. "You ain't takin' me in!"

"You're right, I'm not," Nelson tells him. "You're not going 'in,' you're going 'up.' As in 'up' on the black market auction block. Ka-ching!"

The kid seems to go both pale and red in the face at the same time, making him all blotchy. Nelson surprises him with a hypodermic. Not tranqs, though. "Antibiotics," he tells the boy. "Clean out whatever diseases crawled into your system while you were in that pipe. Even the ones that were there before. Most of them, anyway."

"Please, mister, you don't gotta do this. Please . . ."

Nelson kneels down and takes a good look at him.

"I'll tell you what," he says. "I like your eyes, so I'll make you a deal."

He cuts the cable tie, and offers the same deal he always offers. A countdown. A chance to run. These AWOLs never realize that the game is rigged. It never occurs to them that Nelson can count as fast as he chooses, and they don't know that he's a very, very good shot.

This boy, like all the others, thinks he'll be the one to escape. He takes off, tripping in the field and picking himself up while Nelson counts. He nears the road as Nelson gets to "eight" and raises his gun. "Nine." He has a clear target—the clothing logo on the kid's back. "Ten!" Then Nelson lowers the gun and doesn't fire. Instead he

watches as the kid races across the road, nearly getting hit by a car—but the car swerves around him. The kid then disappears into the woods.

Nelson applauds his own restraint. It would have been so easy to take the kid down. But he has other plans for this AWOL. The injection he gave the kid wasn't an antibiotic at all, but a delivery system for a microscopic tracking chip. The kind they used to monitor the populations of endangered species. This is the fourth AWOL Nelson has tagged and released into the wild since his new mission began. With any luck they'll get picked up by the resistance and give him a clear path to the AWOL sanctuary where Connor Lassiter is holed up. But in the meantime, there are plenty of local leads to follow up on. Nelson smiles. It's good to have a goal. Something joyful to look forward to.

OceanofPDF.com

31 · Miracolina

Miracolina endures her captivity and deprogramming at the hands of the Anti-Divisional Resistance for weeks but never surrenders her core. She never gives in to the things they try to teach her. Oh, she's learned to function within their little world of ex-tithes, doing what's expected, if only so they'll leave her alone. More tithes are brought in, others are placed with families and given new identities. There's no such plan for Miracolina. Even semi-cooperative, she's still too much of a risk. They have no idea, however, what she's really planning.

Miracolina considers herself up for any challenge. While she is a tithe, she has not lived the same sheltered life as most other tithes, and although she's not a girl from the hard streets, she considers herself street-smart and world savvy. Escaping from the velvet-gloved fist of the resistance will be a challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

Early on Lev personally warned her of the futility of an escape attempt. "There are sharpshooters with tranq rifles everywhere," he said, making it sound hopeless. Yet every bit of information helps her, because Lev let it slip that although there's a fence, it isn't electrified. Good to know.

She explores every corner of the huge mansion to which she has access, paying special attention to the many unused, dilapidated rooms and corridors too far gone to be restored. Most of the windows are boarded over, and all the doors to the outside are locked. But the more forgotten an area is, the less reliable those locks will be—and a padlock hasp is only as good as the wood it's screwed into. Such as the lock on the garden door, which has an unpleasant termite infestation. Once she finds the door, she files the information away for future reference.

The ex-tithes' meals are usually served on chipped china that must have been part of the Cavenaugh collection in better days, but on Sundays, the finest stuff is brought out, including silver platters just

large enough to fit beneath her shirt, like armor. Again, she files the information away for future reference.

Now all she needs is a diversion—not just inside the mansion, but outside as well. Unfortunately, that's not something she can create, so she bides her time, confident that an opportunity will present itself. An opportunity such as a tornado watch on a Sunday night.

• • •

The wind is already picking up at dinnertime. Talk of the coming storm rumbles throughout the crowd of kids. Some are scared, some are excited. Lev is notably absent. Maybe he's left to avoid the storm, whisked away by his protectors to a place of greater safety. When the meal is over, Miracolina clears her plate, taking with her a couple of silver serving platters, presumably to bring to the kitchen.

"You don't have to do that, Miracolina," says one of her teachers.

"It's okay, I don't mind," she says with a smile, and the teacher smiles back, glad to see her finally settling in.

The storm hits like spring storms do, a warning wind, then a deluge like heaven itself has ruptured. Rain pours through holes in the roof into the areas that have yet to be repaired. The ballroom, where Miracolina was first greeted by Lev, is at least an inch deep with water. Pans set up beneath leaks in bedrooms fill and must be dumped. It's like bailing out a sinking ship. The Weather Channel shows a grid of Michigan counties blinking angry red with tornado alerts.

"Don't worry," says one of the teachers, "there's a storm cellar if they call a tornado alert in our area." Which they do, at exactly 8:43.

Immediately the staff begins rounding up the kids. With lightning striking and agitated kids, it's hard to keep track of everyone. That's when Miracolina slips away with several serving platters and disappears down a side passage, hurrying toward the termite-ridden door.

Standing in front of the door, she shoves the larger platters under her shirt, both front and back. They're cold and uncomfortable but very necessary. She slips two smaller platters down the back of her sweatpants, turning them into protectors for her rear. She waits for a

powerful burst of lightning to fill the sky in uneven, strobing flashes, and the moment the thunder rolls in a few seconds later, she smashes the door with her shoulder. It gives on the second attempt, while the thunder is still rolling, hiding the sound of the door as it bursts open.

There is still the remains of a path left in the middle of the ruined garden. She races down the path, immediately drenched and almost blinded by rain. Then she races from the garden into the weedy clearing that leads to the woods, in clear view of any sharpshooter, and she wonders if infrared lenses can see through sheets of rain. She knows metal is a conductor of electricity, and in the back of her mind she fears that the lightning might seek her out—but she has to believe that won't happen. She has to believe that God has brought this storm for her, so she can escape—so she can do what she was meant to do. And if she does get struck by lightning, well, that would be a sign from above too, wouldn't it? So she says a silent prayer.

"Lord, if what I'm doing is wrong, then by all means strike me down. Otherwise set me free."

OceanofPDF.com

32 · Lev

A lightning strike is provided. Not one to strike Miracolina down, but to illuminate her for all to see. Or at least for anyone who happens to be looking.

Most everyone is already in, or en route to the storm cellar, which may or may not stand the force of a tornado, considering how old it is. Lev, however, who has always loved storms, and actually has a window in his room to view it, is slow to leave. He stalls, taking a few moments to watch the raw violence of nature. A gust of wind rattles the old windows almost enough to break them, and a particularly long flash of lightning hits. In that flash he sees someone running across the grass and into the woods. It's only a brief glimpse, but it's enough for him to know exactly who it is, even if he can't see her face.

OceanofPDF.com

33 · Miracolina

She doesn't hear the first rifle fire, but she feels the tranq dart as it hits the silver platter strapped to her back, its barbed tip caught in the fabric of her sweatshirt. She doesn't know where the shooter is, except that he's behind her. She was hoping that the sharpshooters had left their stations to shelter from the storm, but at least one, maybe more, are still on the lookout—perhaps knowing that a storm like this is a clear flight opportunity for any kids not yet deprogrammed.

Another dart whizzes past her, inches away, and from a different direction. There is more than one shooter still in place. She knows they're going after her body because they wouldn't risk a shot to the head, so she pulls in her arms, making herself a smaller target. Another dart hits one of the smaller platters covering her rear. She almost didn't put those there because they hampered her ability to run. Now she's glad she did. This time the dart doesn't stick, it just bounces free.

In a moment she's in the woods with the trees whipping around her. If there are any sharpshooters here in the woods, she would be really surprised. More than likely the shots came from the mansion itself. She doubts even the most dedicated snipers would hold their positions in the woods in the middle of a tornado threat. She has no idea in what direction she's running, but any direction is the right one if it's away from the mansion. She knows that eventually she'll come to a fence. She can only hope that it's not too high to climb.

The only view ahead of her comes from freeze-frame glimpses in flashes of lightning. Her clothes are torn and her face scratched by whipping branches. She stumbles into mud but picks herself up and continues. Then, in a flash of light, she sees a chain-link fence up ahead. It's about eight feet high—not too hard to climb, but there's barbed wire across the top. More scrapes, more cuts, but she'll deal with that. She's sure any injuries will heal before she's unwound.

Out of breath and near the end of her stamina, she hurls herself at the fence, but just before she reaches it, she's hit by someone even faster than she is, who takes her down, tackling her to the wet ground. She catches only a glimpse of his face, but it's enough to know who it is. The golden child himself has come to capture her.

"Get off me!" she says, pushing Lev, scratching at him. She tears the platter from her chest and swings it. It connects with his head with a heavy bang. He falls, but he's right back up again.

"I swear I will take your head off with this if I have to!" she says. "Let me go. I don't care if they worship you, I don't care if you're their patron saint. I'm leaving, and you can't stop me!"

Then Lev backs off, breathing heavily, and says, "Take me with you."

It's not what she expected to hear.

"What?"

"I can't be a part of this anymore. I can't be what they want me to be. I'm no one's patron saint, and they can rescue tithes fine without me. So I'm getting out too."

Miracolina doesn't have the time to figure out whether this is a trick. She doesn't even have the time to process what he's saying, but if he's telling the truth, she can test his resolve.

"Give me a boost up the fence."

He does it without hesitation. He helps her up, and she scratches herself on the barbed wire coming down the other side, but at least she's on the other side! Then Lev, the boy who she saw as her jailer, climbs over and joins her.

"There's a road," he says, "maybe a hundred yards or so through the woods. We can flag down a ride."

"Who would be driving on a night like tonight?"

"There's always someone desperate to go somewhere."

The wind dies down a bit by the time they reach the road, but in tornado weather that could be a good sign or bad. They haven't seen hail yet, and hail's a sure sign that something worse is on the way.

Sure enough, there's traffic on the two-lane road—not much, just a car every minute or two, but all they need is one.

“They won’t know we’re gone until after the storm passes,” Lev says. “If someone picks us up, promise me you won’t tell them about the mansion and what we’re doing there.”

“I won’t promise anything,” Miracolina tells him.

“Please,” Lev begs her. “The other kids there aren’t like you. They don’t want to be tithed. Don’t condemn them to something that was never their choice.”

Although it goes against her instincts, right now the line between right and wrong is blurry enough for her to say, “Fine. I won’t tell.”

“We’ll make up a story,” Lev says. “We were out biking and got caught in the storm. Just go along with anything I say. Then when we’re dropped off, if you really want to be tithed, go turn yourself in. I won’t stop you.”

And although she doubts he’ll make it that easy, she agrees.

“What about you? Where will you go?”

“I have no idea,” he tells her, and there is such a spark in his eye when he says it, she can tell having no idea is exactly the way he wants it.

Headlights approach, and the wind picks up again. They wave their arms and the vehicle, a van, pulls over to the side of the road. A window rolls down, and they hurry to the van.

“My God. What are you two doing out here in this?” says the driver.

“We were on our bikes—we didn’t know a storm was coming,” Lev says.

“Where are the bikes?”

“We left them way back,” Miracolina chimes in.

“We’ll come get them after the storm,” Lev says. “There’s a tornado watch—we just need to get out of here. Can you help us?”

“Of course I can.” He unlocks the car, and Lev pulls open the side door. As he does, the dome light comes on, illuminating the man’s face for the first time. Although the moment calls, quite literally, for any port in a storm, Miracolina can’t help but be a bit troubled by the man’s face as she gets in. There’s something odd about it. Or maybe it’s just his eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

34 · Lev

Lev doesn't pay much attention to the driver. He's just glad to be out of the storm and to have transportation away from his gilded cage. He has lied to Miracolina. He has no intention of letting her turn herself in to the Juvenile Authority. He knows he might not be able to stop her, but that doesn't mean he can't try.

A gust of wind almost pushes the van off the road as they drive, and the driver fights it with both hands on the wheel. "Some storm, huh?" The man says as he glances at Lev in the rearview mirror. Lev averts his gaze. The last thing he wants is to be recognized as "that clapper kid."

"Comfy back there?" the man asks. He hasn't asked them where they're headed yet. Lev runs though his mind the names of towns he knows in the area for when the question is inevitably asked.

Outside the rain slices at the windshield at such a violent angle, the wipers are defeated, and they have to pull over. The man turns to them.

"Tornado watch, you say? Do you suppose we'll be taken to Oz?" He seems far too jovial under the circumstances.

"The sooner we all get home the better," Miracolina offers.

"Yes, but you're not headed home," he says, the same happy tone to his voice. "We all know that, don't we?"

Miracolina throws Lev a worried glance. The man has locked his gaze on Lev, and only now does Lev see how very mismatched his eyes are. The sight gives him a chill that has nothing to do with the storm.

"I know you don't remember me, Mr. Calder, because you were unconscious at our last encounter. But I certainly remember you."

Lev reaches for the van door, but it's locked, with no visible way to unlock it.

"Lev!" shouts Miracolina, and when he looks back, he sees the man has pulled out a tranq pistol, which looks extremely large and nasty in

such close quarters. Heavy hail begins to pummel the van, and the man must shout to be heard over it.

"The first time I shot you, it was an accident," he says. "This time it's not." Then he tranqs both of them before they can say a word. Lev catches sight of Miracolina's eyes rolling back and her slumping in the seat before he begins to drown in his own tranquilizer cocktail, spinning down, down, down, while outside the sound of hail gives way to a roar like a freight train barreling through hell.

OceanofPDF.com

35 · Nelson

In a flash of lightning, he sees a glimpse of the tornado. It tears out trees from the side of the road not a hundred yards ahead of him. It tears up the road itself—chunks of asphalt flying into the sky. Something—a piece of road or a tree limb—puts a dent in the roof like the angry stomp of a giant. A side window shatters, and the van is dragged sideways from the shoulder and into the middle of the road.

Nelson feels no fear, only awe. The van begins to lean to the left. He feels the entire vehicle straining in a tug-of-war between the wind and gravity. Finally gravity wins, and the car remains a heavy, earthbound object instead of a two-ton airborne projectile. Then in a moment the tornado is gone, tearing a jagged line toward someone else's misery. The roar fades, and it's just a torrential downpour once more.

This, Nelson knows, is his second great defining moment. The first was the tranq bullet that stole his life. But now his life has been spared. Not just spared, but validated, all in the same moment. The capture of Lev Calder is no accident. Nelson has never believed in divine providence, but he is open to the idea of balance, that there is somehow justice in the grand scheme of things. If that's true, then justice will be visiting him very soon, delivering Connor Lassiter into his waiting hands.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Five

Matters of Necessity

From the *Independent*, a UK news journal:

"HOODIES, LOUTS, SCUM":
HOW MEDIA DEMONISES TEENAGERS

By Richard Garner, Education Editor, Friday, 13 March 2009

The portrayal of teenage boys as "yobs" in the media has made the boys wary of other teenagers, according to new research.

Figures show more than half of the stories about teenage boys in national and regional newspapers in the past year (4,374 out of 8,629) were about crime. The word most commonly used to describe them was "yobs" (591 times), followed by "thugs" (254 times), "sick" (119 times) and "feral" (96 times). Other terms often used included "hoodie," "louts," "heartless," "evil," "frightening," "scum," "monsters," "inhuman" and "threatening."

The research—commissioned by Women in Journalism—showed the best chance a teenager had of receiving sympathetic coverage was if they died.

"We found some news coverage where teen boys were described in glowing terms —'model student,' 'angel,' 'altar boy' or 'every mother's perfect son,' " the research concluded, "but sadly these were reserved for teenage boys who met a violent and untimely death."

The full article can be found at:

http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hoodieslouts-scum-how-media-demonises-teenagers-1643964.html

OceanofPDF.com

36 · Connor

Connor takes out his aggression on the punching bag at least twice a day. He has to. If he doesn't, he might take it out on someone's face. The lazy kid who won't clean the latrines. The moronic girl who smuggled in a cell phone so she could call her friends and tell them where she is. And the kid who makes jokes after every clapper bombing. Connor hits the bag so hard, and so much, it's a wonder the thing doesn't burst.

Risa is gone.

It's been almost a month now. For all he knows she's dead at the hands of the Juvenile Authority, or Proactive Citizenry, or whoever has their clutches on her. It doesn't matter that she's seventeen and disabled—unable to be unwound. The all-seeing government can be very nearsighted when it comes to scrutinizing the actions of its own appendages.

Connor is not the same as he was.

He feels his old patterns and habits returning. The same ones that earned him an Unwind Order to begin with. He thinks back to the days before he was AWOL—when he was just a problem kid. He's back in that place again, only now he's a problem kid responsible for hundreds of other problem kids. He can't help but think that it's not all him. His anger always seems to settle in Roland's hand.

"If you want out, no one would blame you," Starkey tells him over a game of pool one evening. "You should go and try to find Risa. There are others who could take over this place. Trace could do it. Even Ashley or Hayden." He leaves himself out, far too conspicuously. "Maybe we could put it to a vote, once you're gone. Make the whole thing democratic."

"And you're already guaranteed at least a quarter of the vote, aren't you?" says Connor, charging through the bush Starkey keeps beating around.

Starkey doesn't break his gaze, nor does he deny it. "I could run this place if I had to." Then he sinks the eight ball too soon and loses the game. "Damn, you win again."

Connor takes a good look at Starkey, who from the beginning always appeared straightforward and honest. But then, so did Trace. Only now does Connor begin to suspect that Starkey's motives might be more like designs.

"You're good at getting food on the table, and you gave the storks some self-respect," Connor tells Starkey, "but don't think that makes you God's gift to Unwinds."

"No," says Starkey. "I guess that spot's reserved for you." Then he puts down his cue stick and leaves.

Connor mentally smacks himself for being so paranoid. The truth is, he might actually want to groom Starkey to replace him someday—but who is he to be grooming anybody for anything?

Used to be he could share his private insecurities with Risa. She was good at shoring him up by putting Band-Aids on his questionable sense of character long enough for him to heal and get the job done. He could try to confide in Hayden, but Hayden makes a joke out of everything. Connor knows it's a defense mechanism, but still it makes it hard to talk to him about some things. Now his only real confidant is Trace. Connor hates that Trace remains his closest ally, even after revealing himself as a traitor to both sides. But if Risa was a Band-Aid, then Trace is alcohol on an open wound.

"We've all lost people one way or another, and Risa is no different, so stop your bellyaching and do your job."

"I'm not a boeuf," Connor tells him. "I wasn't trained to have no feelings."

"It's not that we don't have feelings, we just know how to harness them and direct them toward specific goals."

Which Connor might be able to do if he had a goal, but life at the Graveyard feels more and more directionless. A treadmill that hurls kids off when they turn seventeen.

Someone—Connor suspects it's Hayden—alerts the Admiral that he's not taking Risa's capture well, so the Admiral pays a surprise visit.

He arrives at the Graveyard in a black limo waxed to such a smooth sheen it doesn't collect the dust it kicks up. Connor barely recognizes him when he steps out. The Admiral's thin. Not just thin but gaunt. His skin, once bronzed from his years in the Graveyard sun, has gotten pale, and he's dressed not in his medal-covered uniform, but in slacks and a plaid shirt, like he's out for a round of golf. He still stands tall, though, and has the unmistakable bearing of a commanding officer.

Connor expects the Admiral will tear him a new one, giving him a reprimand more severe than he himself gave Starkey—but as always, the Admiral's strategy cannot be predicted.

"You've put on some muscle since I last saw you," the Admiral tells him. "I hope to God you're not shooting up those damn military steroids they have the boeufs on; they shrink your testicles down to peanuts."

"No sir."

"Good. Because your genes might actually be worth passing on."

He invites Connor to join him in his plush, air-conditioned limo, and they sit idling on the runway like the thing could sprout wings and take off at any given moment.

They make small talk just a bit. The Admiral tells him of the Great Harlan Reunion: a huge party with all the people who had received his son's parts.

"I'll swear till the day I die that Harlan was there, alive in that garden, and no one can prove he wasn't."

He tells Connor how, when all the "parts" went their separate ways, Emby, his asthmatic friend, had nowhere to go, so the Admiral kept him on and is now raising him like a grandson.

"Not the shiniest Easter egg on the lawn," the Admiral says, "but he's very sincere."

He also tells Connor that due to his damaged heart, the Admiral was given six months to live.

"Of course, that was almost a year ago. Doctors are mostly imbeciles."

Connor suspects that the Admiral will be alive and kicking for years to come.

Finally he gets down to the real reason for his visit. “I hear that this thing with Risa is getting to you,” the Admiral says, then holds his silence, knowing Connor will eventually feel compelled to break it, which he does.

“What do you want me to do? Just go on like it never happened? Like she never existed?”

The Admiral holds a steady demeanor, in spite of Connor’s frustration. “I hadn’t pegged you as the kind of young man who wastes his time feeling sorry for himself.”

“I’m not feeling sorry! I’m angry!”

“Anger is only our friend when we know its caliber and how to aim it.”

That makes Connor give out a sudden guffaw that’s loud enough for the driver to glance back. “Good one! Someone oughta quote you.”

“Someone did. It’s on page ninety-three of the *Military Academy Freshman Ordinance Manual*, fifth edition.” The Admiral turns to look out of the tinted windows at the activity of the Graveyard. “The problem with all you AWOLs is that you use your anger like a grenade, half the time blowing off your own hands.” Then he looks at Connor’s arm. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

But now that the Admiral’s attention has been drawn to the arm, he looks at it more closely. “Do I know that tattoo?” Then he snaps his fingers. “Roland. Wasn’t that his name? A real pain in the ass.”

“That’s the one.”

The admiral ponders the shark a moment more. “I don’t suppose it was your choice to get his arm.”

“It wasn’t my choice to get any unwound arm,” Connor tells him. “If I had a choice, I would have refused it, the same way you refused an unwound heart. The same way Risa refused a new spine.” Connor feels goose bumps rise on the arm from the near-arctic chill of the air conditioner. “But now I’ve got it, and it’s not like I’m gonna hack it off.”

“And well you should keep it!” the Admiral says. “Roland may have been a miscreant, but he was a human miscreant, and deserved better.

I'm sure he'd be satisfied to know that his arm is ruling the Graveyard with an iron fist."

Connor has to laugh. Leave it to the Admiral to make sense of the senseless. Then the man gets quiet. Serious. "Listen here," he says. "This business about Risa—for everyone's sake, you've got to let it go."

But there are some things Connor just can't let go. "I should never have let her make that trip to the hospital."

"If she hadn't, from what I understand an innocent boy would have been unwound."

"So? Let him be unwound!"

The Admiral quietly bristles. "I'm going to forget you said that."

Connor sighs. "You should never have put me in charge. You wanted the Akron AWOL running this place, but he doesn't exist. He never did. He's just a legend."

"I stand behind my decision. You see yourself as failing—but that's not what I see. Sure, when you're in the midst of your own suffering, it's easy to convince yourself that you're no good—but we are all tested in this life, Connor. The measure of a man is not how much he suffers in the test, but how he comes out at the end."

Connor lets his words sink in, wondering when this particular "test" will be over and how many undiscovered layers it might still have. It makes him think about all the things Trace has told him.

"Admiral, have you heard of something called Proactive Citizenry?"

The Admiral thinks about it. "Sounds somewhat familiar. Don't they fund some of those blasted pro-unwinding advertisements?" He shakes his head in disgust. "They remind me of the old 'terror generation' ads."

That catches Connor like a barbed hook. "Terror generation?"

"You know—the Teen Uprisings? The Feral Flash riots?"

"I'm drawing a total blank."

The Admiral looks at him like he's an idiot. "Good God—don't they teach you anything in those poor excuses for schools anymore?" Then he calms down, but only a little. "No, I suppose they wouldn't. History is written by the victors—and when there are no victors, it all winds up in corporate shredders." He looks out the window with the sad resignation of a man who knows he's too old to change the world.

"You must educate yourself, Mr. Lassiter," he says. "They may not teach it, but they can't blot it out entirely. It's the very reason why people were so willing to accept the Unwind Accord. The very reason for our twisted way of life."

"Sorry to be so ignorant," Connor says.

"Don't be sorry. Just do something about it. And if you're curious about this Proactive Citizenry, educate yourself on that, too. What is it you've heard about them?"

Connor considers telling him everything he learned from Trace but realizes it couldn't be good for the man's heart. The Admiral is retired, and while he can be called on to give Connor a swift and necessary boot, it would be wrong of Connor to involve him in things now.

"Nothing," Connor tells him. "Rumors."

"Then leave it to those who have nothing better to do than gossip," the Admiral tells him. "Now man up, get the hell out of my limo, and save these kids' lives."

• • •

Once the Admiral is gone, Trace respectfully requests a private meeting with Connor. In spite of his admission that he's working for the Juvies and Proactive Citizenry, he still treats Connor with the full respect of a commanding officer. Connor doesn't know what to make of this. He can't tell whether it's a scam or if Trace is being sincere. Although Connor can't stomach being a pawn for the Juvies by maintaining their vault of Unwinds, he can't deny that receiving privileged information from Trace makes him feel that he's the one pulling the wool over the eyes of the Juvenile Authority, and not the other way around. The truth hasn't set Connor free, as Trace has suggested, but at least it has given him a sense of power over his captors.

They ride down one of the eastern aisles, past rows of fighter jets so dusty the cockpit windows don't even look like glass. They're far enough away from any activity in the Graveyard that their meeting is very private.

"You need to know that things are brewing," Trace tells him.

"What kinds of things?"

"From what intelligence I've been able to gather, there's dissent in the Juvenile Authority. There are some who want to take this place out—they just need a reason."

"If they want to take us out, the fact that we're here is reason enough."

"I said *some* want to take us out. The suits I work for don't—and as long as everything stays smooth here, they can keep the Juvies muzzled. I've been a good little stool pigeon and continue to tell them that Elvis Robert Mullard is running a tight ship."

Connor laughs. "They still have no clue that Elvis has left the building?"

"None whatsoever—and I've given them no reason to doubt my word." Trace pauses for a moment. "Did you tell the Admiral about me?"

"No," Connor tells him. "I haven't told anyone."

"Good. A leader should know things no one else does, and spoon out information on a need-to-know basis."

"Spare me the military classroom," Connor tells him. "So is that all you wanted to talk about?"

"There's more."

They reach the end of the aisle, and Trace stops before turning into the next one. He pulls out a slip of paper from his pocket and hands it to Connor. There's a name on it, scrawled by hand. *Janson Rheinschild*.

"Is this someone I'm supposed to know?" Connor asks.

"No. He's someone nobody's supposed to know."

Connor has little patience for this. "Don't waste my time with riddles."

"That's the point," Trace says. "He *is* a riddle." He puts the Jeep in gear, and they turn down the next aisle.

"Do you remember the other week when I went up to Phoenix to get components for the Dreamliner's electrical system?"

"You didn't go to Phoenix," Connor says. "You went to meet with your bosses at Proactive Citizenry. Don't you think I know that?"

Trace seems a bit surprised, then a bit pleased. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know whether you trusted me.”

“I don’t.”

“Fair enough. Anyway, it was different this time. They didn’t just meet with me, they flew me out to their main headquarters in Chicago. They had me give a full report to a packed conference room. Of course I left out some key things, like our escape plan. I told them the Dreamliner is a new dormitory jet, and that the cockpit was dismantled and sold.”

“Oh, so it’s not just me that you lie to?”

“They’re not lies. It’s disinformation,” Trace says. “After the meeting, I did some snooping. There was a marble wall in the lobby commemorating former presidents of the organization—some names you’d probably recognize—giants of business both before and after the war . . . but there was one name missing. It had been gouged right out of the marble, with no attempt to patch it up. And then again, out in the garden there was a sculpture of the founders. Five of them, but clearly the pedestal was built for six. There were still rust stains from where that sixth statue had once been.”

“Janson what’s-his-face?”

“Rheinschild.”

Connor tries to work it out but can’t. “It doesn’t make sense. If they wanted to disappear him, why not patch the marble? Why not get a smaller pedestal?”

“Because,” says Trace. “They didn’t just want to disappear him . . . they wanted to make sure their members never forgot that they disappeared him.”

Connor gets a chill in spite of the desert heat. “So what does all this have to do with us?”

“Before they flew me back, a couple of the friendlier suits took me to their private club—a place that served the kind of alcohol you can’t even get on the black market. Real Russian vodka. Tequila from before the agave extinction. Stuff that must cost thousands of dollars a shot, and they were guzzling it like water. When they were fairly wasted, I asked about the missing statue. One of them blurted out the name Janson Rheinschild, then became worried that he had said it. After

that, they changed the subject, and I thought it was over. . . .” Then Trace stops the Jeep so he can look Connor dead in the eye as he speaks. “But then, as I was leaving, one of them said something to me that I still haven’t been able to get out of my mind. He clapped me on the shoulder, called me his ‘friend,’ and told me that unwinding is more than just a medical process, it’s at the very core of our way of life. ‘Proactive Citizenry is dedicated to protecting that way of life,’ he said, ‘and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll forget you ever heard his name.’ ”

OceanofPDF.com

37 · Risa

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"I was a ward of the state about to be unwound, so I went AWOL. That means I shouldn't be here right now. You might think I'm lucky . . . but because I stayed whole, fourteen-year-old Morena Sandoval, an honor student with a bright future, died because she was denied the liver I would have provided. Jerrin Stein, a father of three, died of a fatal heart attack because my heart wasn't available when he desperately needed it. And firefighter Davis Macy lost his life to pulmonary asphyxiation because my lungs weren't there to replace his burned ones.

"I'm alive today because I ran from unwinding, and my selfishness cost these, and many others, their lives. My name is Risa Ward, AWOL Unwind, and now I must live knowing how many innocent people I've killed."

—Sponsored by Citizens for AWOL Justice

OceanofPDF.com

38 · Hayden

Hayden stares at the computer screen, trying to believe Risa's "public service announcement" is some kind of sick joke, but he knows it's not. He wants to be furious at Tad, the busy little net-raker who brought it to his attention, but he knows it's not the kid's fault.

"What do we do now?" Tad asks.

Hayden looks around the ComBom. The eight kids on communications duty all look at him as if he can make the video go away.

"She's a goddamn traitor!" Esme shouts.

"Shut up!" Hayden yells. "Just shut up, let me think." He tries to come up with alternate explanations. Maybe it's not real—just a digital image. Maybe it's a trick designed to demoralize them . . . but the truth screams louder than any conjecture. Risa is publicly speaking in favor of unwinding. She's gone to the other side.

"Connor can't know about this," Hayden says.

Tad shakes his head doubtfully. "But it's been on TV, and trending over the net since this morning. It's not just one, either. She made a whole bunch of public service announcements—and there's an interview, too."

Hayden paces the cramped space of the plane, trying to pull together a coherent thought. "Okay," he says, forcing himself to calm down. "Okay . . . All the computers with web access are here in the ComBom and the library, right? And the Rec Jet TVs all get their feed directly from here."

"Yeah . . ."

"So, can we route everything through facial recognition software before it goes out and scramble it every time she turns up? Do we have a program that can do that?"

No one answers for a few seconds; then Jeevan speaks up. "We have tons of old military security programs, there's got to be facial recognition stuff in there. I'll bet I can patch something together."

“Do it, Jeeves.” Then he turns to Tad. “Cut the feeds to the Rec Jet and library until it’s done. No incoming broadcasts or web connections at all. We’ll tell everyone the satellite is out, or an armadillo mated with the dish, or whatever. Got it?” Agreement all around. “And if any one of you breathes a word of this to anyone, I will personally make sure you spend the next few years of your life shoveling crap out of the latrines. The Risa-bomb stays in the ComBom, *comprende*?”

Again total agreement—but Tad isn’t quite ready to let it go. “Hayden, there was something about it I don’t know if you noticed. Did you see how she—”

“No, I didn’t!” says Hayden, shutting him down. “I didn’t see a thing. And neither did you.”

OceanofPDF.com

39 · Connor

The man with Proactive Citizenry said that unwinding was at the core of the country's way of life.

It sticks in Connor's gut just as it did in Trace's. Connor knows that things haven't always been the way they are now—but when the world's been one way for your entire life, it's hard to imagine it being any different. Years ago, before he was even of unwinding age, Connor got bronchitis, and it just kept coming back. There was actually talk about getting him new lungs, but the problem cleared up. He remembers feeling so sick for so long, after a while he had forgotten what being well even felt like.

Could it be that way for an entire society?

Does a sick society get so used to its illness that it can't remember being well? What if the memory is too dangerous for the people who like things the way they are?

Connor makes the time to go to the library jet to do some research, but the computers are off-line, so he goes straight to Hayden.

"You're telling me everything's down?" he asks Hayden.

Hayden hesitates before answering. "Why? What do you need?" He almost seems suspicious, which is not like him.

"I need to look something up," Connor tells him.

"Can it wait?"

"*It* can, but *I* can't."

Hayden sighs. "Okay, I can get you online in the ComBom—on the condition that you let me do the surfing."

"What, are you afraid I'll break the web?"

"Just humor me, okay? We've had a lot of computer issues, and I'm very protective of the equipment."

"Fine, let's just do this before I get dragged off to deal with someone's idea of an emergency."

The kids in the ComBom are noticeably stressed as soon as they see Connor. He had no idea he inspires that level of fear. "Take it easy," he

says. “No one’s in trouble.” And then he adds, “Yet.”

“Take ten,” Hayden tells them, and the kids file out and down the stairs, happy to be freed, at least temporarily, from their stations.

Hayden sits down with Connor, who pulls out the slip of paper Trace gave him. “Do a search on this name.”

Hayden types in “Janson Rheinschild,” but the results are not promising.

“Hmm . . . There’s a Jordan Rheinschild, an accountant in Portland. Jared Rheinschild—looks like he’s a fourth grader who won some art contest in Oklahoma. . . .”

“No Janson?”

“A few J. Rheinschilds,” offers Hayden. He checks them out. One’s a mother with a low-hit blog about her kids; another’s a plumber. Not a single one seems to be the kind of person who would have a bronze statue erected to them, then destroyed.

“So who is he?”

“When I find out, I’ll let you know.”

Hayden swivels his chair to face Connor. “Is that all you were looking for?”

Then Connor remembers something. Didn’t the Admiral talk about events leading to “our twisted way of life” too? What were those things he said Connor should educate himself about?

“I want you to look up ‘the terror generation.’ ”

Hayden types it in. “What’s that? A movie?”

But when the results begin popping up, it’s clear that it’s not. There are tons of references. The Admiral was right—all the information is right there for anyone to find, but buried among the billions of web pages on the net. They zero in on a news article.

“Look at the date,” says Hayden. “Isn’t that right around the time of the Heartland War?”

“I don’t know,” Connor says. “Do you know the actual dates of the war?”

Hayden has no answer. Strange, because Connor can remember key dates of other wars, but the Heartland War is fuzzy. He’s never been taught about it, has never seen TV shows about it. Sure, he knows it happened, and why, but beyond that there’s nothing.

The first article talks about a spontaneous youth gathering in Washington, DC. Hayden plays a news clip. "Whoa! Are those all people?"

"Kids," Connor realizes. "They're all kids."

The clip shows what must be hundreds of thousands of teens packing the Washington Mall between the Capitol Building and the Lincoln Memorial, so dense you can't even see the grass.

"Is this part of the war?" Hayden asks.

"No, I think it's something else. . . ."

The reporter calls it "The Teen Terror March," already putting a negative spin on the rally. *"This is by far the largest flash riot anyone has ever seen. Police have been authorized to use the new, controversial tranquilizer bullets to subdue the crowd. . . ."*

The idea that tranq bullets could be controversial sets Connor reeling. They're just an accepted part of life, aren't they?

Hayden scrolls down. "The article says they're protesting school closings."

That also throws Connor for a loop. What kid in their right mind would protest their school closing? "There," he says, pointing to a link that says "Fear for the Future."

Hayden clicks on it, and it brings up an editorial clip by some political pundit. He talks about the struggling economy and the collapse of the public education system. *"A nation of angry teenagers with no jobs, no schools, and too much time on their hands? You bet I'm scared—and you should be too."*

More reports—those same angry kids calling for change, and when they don't get it, they hit the streets, forming random mobs, burning cars, breaking windows, letting loose a kind of communal fury. In the midst of the Heartland War, President Moss—just a few weeks before his assassination—calls an additional state of emergency, this time ordering a curfew on everyone under the age of eighteen. *"Anyone caught breaking curfew will be subject to transport to juvenile detention camps."*

There are reports of kids who have either left or been thrown out of their homes. "Ferals," the news calls them. Like stray dogs. Then comes a shaky video of three kids swinging their hands together. A

sudden white flash, and the image becomes static. *"Apparently,"* says the news anchor, *"these feral suicide bombers have altered their blood chemistry, so that bringing their hands together triggers detonation."*

"Holy crap!" says Hayden. "The first clappers!"

"All this was going on during the Heartland War," Connor points out. "The nation was tearing itself apart over pro-life and pro-choice but completely ignored the problems of the kids who were already here. I mean, no schools, no work, no clue if they'd even have a future. They just went nuts!"

"Tear it all down and start over."

"Do you blame them?"

Suddenly it was obvious to Connor why they don't teach it. Once education was restructured and corporatized, they didn't want kids knowing how close they came to toppling the government. They didn't want kids to know how much power they really had.

The various links lead Connor and Hayden to an image that's much more widespread and familiar: hands being shaken at the signing of the Unwind Accord. In the background is the Admiral as a much younger man. The report talks about peace being declared between the Life Army and the Choice Brigade, giving everyone hope for domestic normalization. Nowhere are the teen uprisings mentioned—yet within weeks of the Accord, the Juvenile Authority was established, feral detention centers became harvest camps, and unwinding became . . . a way of life.

That's when the truth hits Connor so brutally he feels light-headed. "My God! The Unwind Accord wasn't just about ending the war—it was also a way to take down the terror generation!"

Hayden leans away from the computer like it might start clapping and blow them all up. "The Admiral must have known that."

Connor shakes his head "When his committee proposed the Unwind Accord, he never believed people would actually go for it, but they did . . . because they were more terrified of their teenagers than their consciences."

Connor knows that Janson Rheinschild, whoever he was, must have played into this somewhere, but Proactive Citizenry was extremely thorough in wiping him off the face of the earth.

OceanofPDF.com

40 · Starkey

Mason Starkey knows nothing of Janson Rheinschild, the terror generation, or the Heartland War. If he did, he wouldn't care. The only teen uprising he has any interest in will involve the Stork Club.

His motives are a complex weave of self-interest and altruism. He truly wants to raise his storks to glory, as long as they all know *he's* the one who's done it. Credit where credit is due, and honor to the trickster whose illusions finally become real.

Starkey's hoping for a silent coup, but is prepared for anything. It will either be gracious, and Connor will see the wisdom of stepping aside for a more able leader . . . or he'll be steamrolled. Starkey will bear no guilt if it comes to that. After all, Connor, in spite of all his pretenses of fairness, still refuses to rescue storks from their unwindings.

"We save the kids we're most likely to get away with saving," Connor told him. "It's not our fault that storks are in bigger families and more complicated situations." It was the same excuse that Hayden had given him, but as far as Starkey is concerned, that's no excuse at all.

"So you're happy just letting them be unwound?"

"No! But there's only so much we can do!"

"So little, you mean."

Connor lost his temper then, which he does more and more often now. "If it was up to you, we'd be blowing up harvest camps, wouldn't we? That's not how this battle is going to be won! It will just make them come down harder on every Unwind, every AWOL."

Starkey wanted to take his argument all the way to the wall and nail Connor to it for letting storks go unsaved, but instead, Starkey backed down.

"I'm sorry," he told Connor. "You know I get passionate when it comes to storks."

"Your passion's a good thing," Connor told him, "when you keep it in perspective."

He could have slammed Connor for that, but instead he just smiled, agreed, and left—secure in the knowledge that someday soon Connor would be faced with an entirely new perspective.

• • •

While Connor has a history lesson with Hayden in the Com-Bom, Starkey relaxes at the Rec Jet, teaching kids simple card tricks and dazzling them with close-up magic he could do in his sleep. It's Stork Hour. Seven to eight p.m. Prime time. There's a nice breeze blowing under the Rec Jet. It's a perfect time of day. He has one of the storks bring him a drink so he doesn't have to get out of his comfortable chair. It's been a hard day dishing slop—and although he doesn't actually do the dishing, supervision can be a bitch.

Drake, the farm boy who runs the Green Aisle, passes and gives them a dirty look. Starkey glares back and makes a mental note. When he takes over, the new Holy of Whollies will be made up of all storks. Drake will be demoted to picking beans, or cleaning chicken crap. Many things will change when Starkey takes over, and God help anyone who's not in his good graces.

"You gonna get off your ass and play me a game of pool?" Bam asks, pointing her cue at him like a harpoon. "Or do my superior skills challenge your masculinity?"

"Watch it, Bam," Starkey warns. He will not play her, because he knows she'll win. First rule of competition—never accept a losing proposition. He loses when he plays Connor, of course, but that's different. It's intentional, and he makes sure the other storks know it.

Farther down the main aisle, Connor comes down the stairs of the ComBom with Hayden.

"What do you think that's all about?" Bam asks.

Starkey keeps his opinion to himself.

"I think they're hot for each other," says one of the other storks.

Starkey turns to him. "You're the only one I know who keeps checking out Connor's butt, Paulie."

"That ain't true!" But by the way Paulie goes red, it's clear that it is.

Finally Starkey stands up to get a better look at the situation. Connor and Hayden say their good-byes. Hayden heads toward the latrine, and Connor goes back to his own little jet.

"He's been having private meetings with Trace, too," Bam points out. "But he hasn't been sharing any secrets with you, has he?"

Starkey hides his fury at being left out of whatever Connor is plotting. "He must be happy with food service."

"A regular fatted cow," Bam says with a grin. "Just about ready for slaughter."

"I will not have you bad-mouthing our commander in chief."

Bam turns and spits on the ground. "You're such a freakin' hypocrite." Then she goes back to playing pool against kids who never beat her.

Starkey, however, has no need to bad-mouth Connor. Griping is for those without a plan of action—and tonight Starkey has something new up his sleeve. A gift for Connor. It comes in the person of Jeevan, whose skill with computers got him assigned to the ComBom, and who happens to be a loyal Stork Club member. Of course, no one but Starkey knows that fact. "Jeeves" is one of two well-positioned "sleeper agents," whose allegiance is to him, rather than Connor. And what a gift Jeeves has provided! Starkey's been saving it for just the right moment. He concludes that now—when Connor seems to be getting his balance back—is the perfect time to unwrap it . . . and while the gift is in his arms, pull the rug out from under him.

OceanofPDF.com

41 · Connor

Connor sits alone in his jet, staring into space, trying to process everything he's just learned. *We can't stop unwinding,* the Admiral once told him. *The best we can hope to do is save as many of these kids as we can.* But somehow, after seeing those old news reports, Connor is starting to feel that maybe the Admiral was wrong. Maybe there *is* a way to end unwinding. If only he can figure out how to truly learn from the past . . .

Connor is still pondering the dark specter of history late into the evening, when Starkey shows up at his jet. Connor opens the hatch for him. "What's up? Is there a problem?"

"You'll have to tell me if it's a problem," Starkey says enigmatically. "Can I come in?"

Connor lets him in, "It's been a killer day—this had better be good."

"There's a TV here, right?"

Connor points to it. "Yeah, but there's no line in, and the color sucks."

"Don't need a line, and color's not gonna matter when you see what I've got." Starkey pulls out a microdrive and plugs it into the TV's data port. "You should sit down."

Connor laughs. "Thanks, but I'll stand."

"You sure?"

Connor gives him a funny look, continues standing, and waits for an image to come on the screen.

He recognizes the show immediately. It's a weekly news magazine he has seen many times before. A familiar TV journalist discusses the featured story. The logo screened in behind her says angel of division.

"A little over a year ago," she begins, *"clappers took out an unwinding facility in Happy Jack, Arizona. The social and political fallout from that event still resonates today, but one girl—an infamous player in that event—is speaking out. Her message, however, is not what you think. You may have seen her in various public service*

announcements blitzing the airwaves. In a short time, she's gone from being one of the Juvenile Authority's most wanted to becoming the poster child for the cause of unwinding. Yes, you heard me right: FOR unwinding. Her name is Risa Ward, and you're not going to forget her anytime soon."

Connor takes a deep, shuddering breath and realizes that Starkey was right—he needs to sit down. His legs practically fall out from under him as he sinks into the chair.

The studio shot cuts to Risa being interviewed in some plush location by the same journalist. There's something different about her, but Connor can't yet tell what it is.

"Risa," begins the journalist, *"you were a ward of the state slated for unwinding, became a coconspirator with the notorious Akron AWOL, and were even present at Happy Jack Harvest Camp to witness his death. After all that, how is it that you now speak in favor of unwinding?"*

Risa hesitates before answering, then says, *"It's complicated."*

Starkey crosses his arms. "Yeah, I'll bet it is."

"Quiet!" snaps Connor.

"Could you walk us through it?" the journalist asks, with a disarming grin that Connor wants to punch right off her face with Roland's fist.

"Let's just say I have a different perspective now than I had before."

"You've come to see unwinding as a good thing?"

"No, it's a terrible thing," she answers, which gives Connor hope . . . until she says, *"But it's the least of all evils. Unwinding is there for a reason, and the world would be very different without it."*

"Pardon me for pointing this out, but that's easy for you to say, now that you're seventeen and beyond unwinding age."

"No comment," says Risa, and it's like a dagger slowly twisting in Connor's gut.

"Let's talk about the charges against you," the journalist says, looking at her notes. *"Theft of government property, namely yourself; conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism; conspiracy to commit murder—and yet all these charges against you have been dropped. Does that have anything to do with your change of heart?"*

"I won't deny that I was offered a deal," Risa says, *"but the dropping of those charges is not the reason why I'm here today."* Then she does

something very simple—something that no one else would notice in the slightest, except for those who know her. . . .

Risa crosses her legs.

For Connor, it's as if the air has been sucked out of the jet. He half expects oxygen masks to drop from the ceiling.

"If you think that's bad, listen to this next part," says Starkey, actually seeming to enjoy it.

"Risa, would you call your change of heart a matter of convenience or a matter of conscience?"

Risa takes time to craft her answer, but that doesn't make it any less devastating. *"Neither,"* she says. *"After all I've been faced with, I find I have no choice. For me, supporting unwinding is a matter of necessity."*

"Turn it off," Connor says.

"There's still more—you really should hear the end."

"I said turn it off!"

Starkey reaches over and turns off the TV, and Connor feels his mind slamming shut like a fire door to keep out all the things too hot to handle—but he knows it's too late; the fire has already leaped inside. In this moment he wishes he had been unwound a year ago. He wishes Lev hadn't come in to save him, because then he would never have to feel what he's feeling now.

"Why did you show me this?"

Starkey shrugs. "I thought you had a right to know. Hayden knows, but he's been keeping it from you. I think that's wrong and completely unfair to you. Knowing who's your friend and who's your enemy can only make you stronger, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Connor says absently.

Starkey grips his shoulder. "It's okay, you'll get over it. We're all here to support you." Then he leaves, his mission of enlightenment accomplished.

Connor sits for a long time without moving. Although he knows he needs to be strong enough to carry this burden, he feels so shredded inside, he doesn't know how he can make it through the night, much less take care of hundreds of Unwinds in the days ahead. All those lofty ideas of exposing history to end unwinding implode into a single desperate thought.

Risa. Risa. Risa.

He is hobbled. How could Starkey not know how devastated he would be? Either he's stupider than Connor thought . . . or he's much, much smarter.

OceanofPDF.com

42 · Starkey

Jeeves brings Starkey a copy of the list of local unwind orders. There are only three kids on this list deemed savable, and none of them are storks. But today is the day that things change. There is a storked kid on the list, ignored and forgotten.

Jesus LaVega
287 North Brighton Lane

Well, Connor doesn't have a monopoly on rescuing Unwinds. It's high time Starkey took things into his own hands.

"Hey, we're saving Jesus, instead of him saving us," someone says when Starkey tells the Stork Club his plan. Another kid raps him on the head. "It's pronounced *Haysoos*, moron."

But regardless of how he pronounces his name, Jesus is about to get a wholly visitation.

• • •

At eleven o'clock p.m., one day before the Juvies are due to come for Jesus, Starkey and nine Stork Clubbers storm the house at 287 North Brighton Lane. They have weapons, because Starkey picked the arsenal lock. They have cars, because the kid in charge of vehicle maintenance is a loyal member of the Stork Club.

They don't knock, they don't ring. They break down the doors, front and back, crashing the place like a SWAT team taking down a crack house.

A woman screams and herds two younger kids to a back room. Starkey doesn't see anyone the right age to be the target of their rescue. He goes into the living room in time to see a man pull down a curtain rod and turn to him—it's the closest thing to a weapon the man can find on such short notice. Starkey easily disarms him and

pushes him up against the wall with the muzzle of a submachine gun to his chest. "Jesus LaVega. Tell me where he is. Now!"

The father's eyes dart back and forth in panic, then fix on something behind Starkey. Starkey turns in time to see a baseball bat swinging at him. He ducks, and the bat breezes past an inch from his head. The kid holding the bat is the size of a linebacker.

"No! Stop! You're Jesus LaVega, right? We're here to save you!"

But that doesn't stop him from swinging the bat again. It connects with Starkey's side. An explosion of pain. Starkey goes down, his weapon flies behind a sofa, and now the kid is over him, hefting the bat once more. Starkey can't catch his breath. His side hurts so much he can only breathe shallow gulps of air.

"Juvies! Here! Tomorrow!" Starkey gasps. "Your parents! Unwinding you!"

"Nice try!" he says, and pulls back the bat, ready to swing again. "Run, Dad! Get out!" The man tries to scramble away but is cornered by other storks. Doesn't this kid get it? Doesn't he realize they already signed the order to have him unwound? Jesus LaVega tenses his muscles to swing just as one of Starkey's storks comes up behind him with a large football trophy and swings the marble base at his head. The heavy stone connects with the back of Jesus's head, and he crumples to the ground instantly. The trophy falls to the floor, broken.

"What did you do?" screams Starkey.

"He was gonna kill you!" screams the stork.

Starkey kneels down beside Jesus. Blood pours out of his head, soaking the carpet. His eyes are half-open. Starkey feels for a pulse but can't find one, and when he turns the kid's head, he can see how badly his skull was crushed by the heavy trophy base. One thing is certain: Jesus LaVega is not going to be unwound. Because he's dead.

Starkey looks to the kid who did it, who panics under Starkey's gaze. "I didn't mean it, Starkey! Honest! I swear! He was gonna kill you!"

"It's not your fault," Starkey tells him, then turns to the kid's father, who's cornered like a spider.

"You did this!" Starkey screams. "You kept him here all his life just so you could unwind him. Do you even care that he's dead?"

The man is horrified by the news. "D-dead? No!"

"Don't pretend you care!" Starkey can't hold it in anymore. He can't hold back. This man—this monster who would unwind his stork-brought son—has to pay for what he's done!

Ignoring the pain in his side, Starkey swings his foot, connecting with the man's torso. *He should feel this pain, not me. He should feel all of it!* Starkey kicks again and again. The man screams, the man moans, but Starkey keeps swinging his foot, unable to stop—it's as if he's channeling the fury of every doorstep baby, every unwanted child, all kids everywhere who were treated like something less than human just because they were born to mothers who didn't want them.

Finally one of the other storks grabs Starkey, pulling him away.

"That's enough, man," he says. "He gets the idea."

The man, bloody and beaten, still has enough strength to crawl out the door. The rest of his family has escaped too, running to neighbors. They've probably called the police, and Starkey realizes that he can't stop now, he's gone too far—he has to take this all the way. This isn't what he wanted, but somehow he can use it. Yes, the kid they came to rescue is dead, but this night can't end with that. It has to stand for something. It has to be worth something. Not just for Starkey, but for all storks.

"Let this be a warning," he yells out the front door as the man stumbles away. He spots neighbors on their porches. Strangers are there to hear his words. Good! It's time for people to listen. "Let this be a warning," he says again, "to anyone who would unwind a stork! You will all get what's coming to you!" Then, in a flash of inspiration, he runs through the house and into the garage.

"Starkey!" one of the others yells after him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"You'll see."

In the garage he finds a gas can. It's only half-full, but half is enough. He runs through the house pouring gasoline everywhere, and on the mantel above the fireplace he finds a book of matches.

Moments later he's racing across the lawn away from the house, toward his friends in the waiting Jeeps, while an ominous glow rises within the house behind him. By the time he climbs into a Jeep,

flames are rising in the windows, and the moment the Jeeps screech away into the night, those windows begin to explode, and smoke pours forth from the rising inferno. The entire house has become a blazing beacon to let the world know that Mason Starkey was here, and people are going to pay.

OceanofPDF.com

43 · Avalanche

This document I sign of my own free will.

That was the last line of the consent form that Risa Ward signed, just as Roberta had predicted she would. Signing that form has given her a new spine and the use of her legs, but that's not all it did. It set into motion a cascading series of events that Risa could not have predicted, and yet was expertly orchestrated by Roberta, her associates, and their money.

. . . I sign of my own free will.

Risa has never gone skiing—such frivolous activities were not offered to state wards—yet lately she's been dreaming that she's skiing down a triple black diamond slope, chased by the leading edge of an avalanche. There's no stopping until she either reaches the bottom, or sails off a cliff to her doom.

. . . my own free will.

Before the news interviews, before the public service announcements, before she knows any of what she'll be asked to do, Risa's damaged spine is replaced, and she awakes from a five-day medically induced coma into her brave new life.

OceanofPDF.com

44 · Risa

"Tell me if you can feel this," a nurse says, scraping Risa's toe with a strip of plastic. Risa gasps in spite of herself. Yes, she feels it—and it's not just a phantom sensation. She can feel the sheets brushing against her legs. She can feel her toes again. She tries to move them, but just moving her toes makes every part of her body ache.

"Don't try to move, dear," the nurse tells her. "Let the healing agents do their job. We're using second-generation healing agents. You'll be up and walking in two weeks."

It speeds her heart to hear those words. She wishes the connection between her heart and her mind could be more direct—that the part of her that wants this could be firmly ruled by the part of her that doesn't—because although her mind wants to despise what they've done for her, the part of her that knows no reason is filled with joy at the prospect of holding her own balance and moving under the power of her own legs.

"You'll require a lot of physical therapy, of course. Not as much as you might think, though." The nurse checks the devices that are attached to her legs. They are electrical stimulators, which cause her muscles to contract, awakening them from their atrophied state, building them back to prime body tone. Each day she feels like she's run miles, although she hasn't left the bed.

She's no longer in a cell. It's not really a hospital, either. She can tell it's some sort of private home. She can hear the roar of ocean surf outside her window.

She wonders if the staff knows who she is and what happened to her. She chooses not to bring it up, because it's too painful. Better just to take it day by day and wait until Roberta comes for her again, to tell her what more she has to do to fulfill the terms of her so-called contract.

It's not Roberta who visits her, though, it's Cam. He's the last person she wants to see, if she indeed can call him a person. His hair

has filled in a bit since the time she first saw him, and the scars on his face from the various grafts are slimmer. You can barely see the seam where the different skin tones touch.

"I wanted to see how you were feeling," he says.

"Sick to my stomach," she tells him, "but that only started when you walked in."

He goes to the window and opens the blinds a bit more, letting in bars of afternoon light. A particularly loud wave crashes on the shore outside the window. " 'The ocean is a mighty harmonist,' " he says, quoting someone she's probably never even heard of. "When you can walk," Cam tells her, "you should look at your view. It sure is pretty this time of day."

She doesn't answer him. She just waits for him to leave, but he doesn't.

"I need to know why you hate me," he asks. "I've done nothing to you. You don't even know me, but you hate me. Why?"

"I don't hate you," Risa admits. "There's no 'you' to hate."

He comes up beside her bed. "I'm here, aren't I?" He puts his hand on hers, and she pulls away.

"I don't care who or what you are, nobody touches me."

He thinks for a moment, then says, in all seriousness, "Would you like to touch *me* then? You can feel all the seams. You can see what makes me me."

She doesn't even dignify that with a response. "Do you think the kids who were unwound to be a part of you wanted it?"

"If they were tithes, they did," Cam says, "and some of them were. As for the other ones, they had no choice . . . any more than I had a choice in being made."

And for a moment, within the fury she feels toward the people who created him, Risa realizes that Cam, as much as all the kids who were unwound to make him, is a victim too.

"Why are you here?" she asks him.

"I have lots of answers to that one," Cam says proudly. " 'The sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.' Carl Jung."

Risa sighs, exasperated. “No—why are you here, in this place, talking to me? I’m sure Proactive Citizenry has more important things for their beta test to do than talk to me.”

“Where the heart is,” he says. “Uh—I mean—I’m here because this is my home. But I’m also here because I want to be.”

He smiles at her, and she hates the fact that his smile is sincere. She has to keep reminding herself that it’s not his smile at all. He’s just wearing the flesh of others, and if it was all peeled away, there’d be nothing in the center. He is little more than a cruel trick.

“So did your brain cells come preprogrammed? A head full of ganglia implants from the best and the brightest?”

“Not all of them,” Cam says quietly. “Why do you keep holding me responsible for the things I had no control over? I am what I am.”

“Spoken like a true god.”

“Actually,” he says, returning a little bit of her attitude, “God said, ‘I am *that* I am,’ if you’re going by the King James version.”

“Don’t tell me—you came programmed with the entire Bible.”

“In three languages,” Cam says. “Again, not my fault, it’s just there.”

Risa has to laugh at the audacity of his creators—did it occur to them that filling him with biblical knowledge while playing God was the ultimate hubris?

“And anyway, it ain’t like I can regurgitate it verbatim, I just got a workin’ knowledge of a whole lotta stuff.”

She looks at him, wondering whether the sudden change in speech pattern from advanced-placement to country-casual is a joke, but she can tell it’s not. She supposes as connections spark through the various and sundry bits of his brain, he kicks out all kinds of talk.

“May I ask you what made you change your mind?” he asks. “Why did you agree to the operation?”

Risa looks away. “I’m tired,” she tells him, even though she’s not, and shifts to face away from him. Even this action of rolling sideways in her bed was something she could not easily accomplish before the operation.

When it becomes clear that she’s not going to answer him, he asks, “May I come see you again?”

She keeps her back to him. “No matter what I say, you’ll come anyway, so why bother asking?”

“Well,” he says as he leaves, “it would be nice to have permission.”

She lies there in that position for a long time, trying not to give a foothold to any of the thoughts swimming through her mind. Finally she dozes off. This is the first night she dreams of the avalanche.

• • •

Roberta is off somewhere taking care of business on the day Risa first walks—and only a week after waking up, instead of two. It’s a day that brings to a head all her conflicted emotions. She wants this to be a personal moment, not something shared, but as usual, Cam comes uninvited.

“Milestone! This is a momentous occasion,” he tells her cheerily. “It should be witnessed by a friend.”

She throws him an icy gaze, and he does a verbal backpedal.

“Aaaand since no friends are present, I’ll have to do.”

A male nurse who looks more like a steroid-pumped boeuf grabs Risa’s upper arm and helps her swing her legs off the bed. It’s an unearthly sensation to actually feel them cantilevered out over the floor. She bends her knees shakily until she feels the tips of her toes touch the wooden floor.

“They should have a rug on the floor,” Cam tells Nurse Beefcake. “To make it softer for her.”

“Rugs slip,” Nurse Beefcake replies.

With the nurse holding her on one side, and Cam on the other, she rises to her feet. The first step is the hardest. It’s like dragging her foot through mud, but the second step comes with remarkable ease.

“Atta girl!” says the nurse, like he’s talking to a baby taking her first step—and in a sense she is. She has no balance whatsoever, and her knees feel like they’ll give out at any moment, but they don’t.

“Keep going,” Cam says. “You’re doing great!” By the fifth step, she can’t hold back the visceral joy she’s been suppressing. A smile fills her face. She becomes short of breath and giggles giddily at the simple joy of walking.

“That’s it,” says Cam. “You’re doing it! You’re whole again, Risa! You have a right to enjoy it!”

And although she doesn’t believe that’s true, she can’t fight the moment. “The window!” she says. “I want to look out the window.”

As they turn slightly to angle toward the window, Nurse Beefcake tentatively lets go, and now it’s just Risa with her arm around Cam’s shoulder and his arm around her waist—and she wants to be furious that she wound up stuck in this position with him, but that feeling is overridden by giddy sensory overload from her feet, her ankles, her shins, her thighs; parts of her body that just a few short days ago felt nothing at all.

OceanofPDF.com

45 · Cam

For Cam this is nothing short of heaven. She's holding him. Relying on him. He convinces himself that this is the moment that all the barriers will fall. He's convinced she will turn to him and kiss him even before they reach the window.

She grips his neck tightly for support. Her hold on him pinches the seam there, but it's a good feeling. He imagines her putting pressure on all his seams, making them ache. No pain could ever feel so good.

They reach the window. No kiss, but she hasn't let go of him either. She can't or she'll fall, but Cam wants to believe she'd hold him anyway.

The sea is rough this morning. Spray launches high into the air with the pounding of eight-foot rollers. An island can be seen in the distance.

"No one ever told me where we are."

"Molokai," Cam tells her. "In Hawaii. The island used to be a leper colony."

"And Roberta owns this place?"

Cam detects unveiled bitterness in the way Risa says her name. "It's owned by Proactive Citizenry. Actually, I think about half the island is. This place was some rich guy's summer home once, but now it's their medical research center—and Roberta is the head of medical research."

"Are you her only project?"

It's a question Cam has never even considered before. As far as he knows, he is the center of Roberta's universe. "You don't like her, do you?"

"Who, me? No, I love her dearly. Evil scheming bitches are my favorite kind of people."

Cam feels a sudden protectiveness and an unexpected spike of anger. "Red light!" he blurts. "She's the closest thing I have to a mother."

"You'd be better off storked."

"Easy for you to say. A ward like you doesn't even know what a mother is."

Risa gasps, then brings her hand back and slaps him hard across the face. The momentum of the slap pushes her off balance, and she falls backward—but the nurse is there to catch her. He gives Cam an accusing glance, then returns his attention to Risa. "Enough for now," the way-too-muscular male nurse says. "Back into bed."

He helps Risa back to bed while Cam stands impotently at the window, not sure who to be mad at—himself, her, or the nurse for taking her away from him.

"Did the slap sting evenly, Cam," she asks with a nasty bite in her voice, "or do the kids in your face all feel it differently?"

"Teflon!" he says, refusing to let her comment stick.

"Muzzle!" He cannot let himself lash out again. He cannot! He takes a deep breath, picturing the tumultuous sea calming to a glassy lake.

"I know I invited that slap," he tells her calmly, "but watch what you say about Roberta. I do not speak unkindly of the people you love—have the same courtesy for me."

• • •

Cam gives Risa some space. He knows this change in her life must be as traumatic as it is wonderful for her. He still doesn't quite understand what made Risa change her mind about allowing the operation, but he knows Roberta can be persuasive. He likes to pretend that some of it had to do with him—that deep down, beneath her initial repulsion, was a curiosity, perhaps even an admiration for the mosaic that had been created from all his disparate parts. Not the one they put together for him, but how he took what he was given and made it all work.

They eat one meal a day together. "It is imperative," Roberta tells him, "if the two of you are ever going to bond, that you dine together. Meals are when the psyche is most vulnerable to attachment."

He wishes Roberta didn't make it all sound so clinical. Growing accustomed to each other's company shouldn't be about Risa's "vulnerability to attachment."

Risa does not yet know that she is here to be his companion.

"Do not rush this," Roberta has told Cam. "She must be groomed for the role, and we have other things planned for her first. We're turning her folk-legend status to our advantage, creating a powerful media presence before we link the two of you together publicly. That will take time. In the meantime, be your wonderful, charming self. She is yours to win."

"And if I don't?"

"I have every confidence in you, Cam."

Risa is in his thoughts through each activity of the day. She becomes a thread weaving through all the seams of his mind, binding them together more tightly. And she's thinking of him, too. He knows because of the way she watches him secretly. He plays basketball one afternoon with an off-duty guard. He has his shirt off, revealing not only his seams, but his musculature, in tip-top shape. A boxer's six-pack abs, a swimmer's powerful pecs—flawless muscle groups reined in by a finely tuned motor cortex to produce the perfect layup. Risa watches him play from a window in the main living room. He knows, but he doesn't let on—he just delivers spectacular game, allowing his body to speak for itself. Only when he's done playing does he glance up at her, to let her know that her stolen glimpses of him aren't stolen at all—they're given freely. She backs away from the window into shadows, but they both know she was watching. Not because she had to but because she wanted to, and Cam knows that makes all the difference in the world.

OceanofPDF.com

46 · Risa

Risa walks up the spiral staircase. Risa walks down the spiral staircase. Risa works with Kenny the physical therapist, who keeps telling her how quickly she's gaining strength. She hears no news of the outside world. For all she knows it no longer exists, and this island clinic—which is not a clinic at all—quickly feels like home. And she hates that.

As much as Risa dreads the daily meal with Cam, she also finds herself looking forward to it. It's out on the veranda, weather permitting, and whichever meal it is, it's always the best meal of the day. Cam, who has been happy to show off his remarkable physique to her from a distance, is awkward at the meals, and just as uncomfortable as she is to be thrust together like it's some sort of arranged marriage. They don't speak of the day she slapped him. They don't speak about much of anything. Risa puts up with him. Cam puts up with her putting up with him. Finally he breaks the ice.

"I'm sorry about that day," he says as they eat steaks together on the veranda. "I was just upset. There's nothing wrong with being a state ward. In fact, parts of me know what it's like. I have memories of state homes. More than one."

Risa looks down at her food. "Please don't talk to me about that, I'm eating."

But he doesn't stop. "They're not the nicest of places, are they? You have to fight for every bit of attention, otherwise you live a life of bare adequacy, which is the worst life of all."

She looks up at him. He's put into words the feelings she's always had about the way she grew up.

"Do you know which homes you were in?" she asks.

"Not really," he tells her. "There are images, feelings, specific memories, but for the most part, my language center didn't come from state wards."

“I’m not surprised,” Risa says. “Language skills are not a strong point at state homes.” She grins.

“Do you know your history?” Cam asks. “How you ended up there? Who your birth parents are?”

Risa feels a lump in her throat and tries to swallow it down.

“No one knows that information.”

“I can get it for you,” Cam tells her.

It leaves her with a feeling of dread and anticipation. And this time she’s very pleased to say that the dread wins out.

“It’s not something that I’ve ever needed to know, and I don’t need to know now.”

Cam looks down, a little disappointed. Maybe a little bit crushed, and Risa finds herself reaching across the table to clasp his hand. “Thank you for offering. It was very kind of you, but it’s something I’ve come to terms with.” It’s only when she lets go of his hand that she realizes that it’s the first time she has voluntarily made physical contact with him. The moment is not lost on him, either.

“I know you were in love with the boy they call the Akron AWOL,” Cam says.

Risa tries not to react.

“I’m sorry he died,” Cam says. Risa looks at him in horror until he says, “That must have been a horrible day at Happy Jack Harvest Camp—to be there when it happened.”

Risa takes a deep, shuddering breath. So Cam doesn’t know he’s alive. Does that mean that Proactive Citizenry doesn’t know either? It’s something she can’t speak of, can’t ask about, because it would provoke too many questions.

“Do you miss him?” Cam asks.

Now Risa can tell him the truth. “Yes, I do. Very much.”

It’s a long time before Cam speaks again. And when he does, he says, “I would never ask to take his place in your heart, but I hope there’s room for me in there as a friend.”

“I make no promises,” says Risa, trying to sound less vulnerable than she truly feels.

“Do you still think I’m ugly?” Cam asks her. “Do you still think I’m hideous?”

Risa wants to answer him truthfully, but it takes a while to find the right words. He takes her hesitation for an attempt to spare his feelings. He looks down. "I understand."

"No," Risa says, "I don't think you're hideous. It's just that there's no way to measure you. It's like looking at a Picasso and trying to decide if the woman in the painting is ugly or beautiful. You don't know, but you can't stop looking."

Cam smiles. "You see me as art. I like that."

"Yeah, well, I never cared for Picasso."

That makes Cam laugh, and Risa does too, in spite of herself.

• • •

The cliffside plantation estate has a rose garden filled with well-pruned hedges and exotic, aromatic flowers.

Risa, having been raised in the concrete confines of an inner-city state home, was never much of a garden girl, but once she was allowed access, she began coming out daily, if only to pretend that she isn't a prisoner. The sensation of walking again is still new enough to make every step in the garden feel like a gift.

Today, however, Roberta is there, preparing some sort of miniature production. There is a small camera crew, and smack in the middle of the garden sits her old wheelchair. The sight of it brings back a flood of too many emotions to sort through right now.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?" Risa asks, not sure she really wants to know.

"You've been on your feet for almost a week now," Roberta tells her. "It's time to deliver on the first of the services you've agreed to perform."

"Thank you for wording it just the right way to make me feel like I'm prostituting myself."

For a moment Roberta is flustered, but she's quick to recover her poise. "I meant it no such way, but you do have a knack of taking things and twisting them." Then she hands Risa a sheet of paper. "Here are your lines. You'll be recording a public service announcement."

Risa has to laugh at that. "You're putting me on TV?"

"And in print ads, and on the net. It's the first of many plans we have for you."

"Really, and what else do you have planned?"

Roberta smiles at her. "You'll know when it's your time to know."

Risa reads over the single paragraph, and the words go straight to the pit of her stomach.

"If you're unable to memorize them, we have cue cards prepared," Roberta says.

Risa has to read the paragraph twice just to convince herself she's actually seeing what she's seeing. "No! I won't say this, you can't make me say this!" She crumples the page and throws it down.

Roberta calmly opens her folder and hands her another one. "You should know by now that there's always another copy."

Risa won't take it. "How dare you make me say this?"

"Your histrionics are uncalled-for. There's absolutely nothing in there that isn't true."

"It doesn't matter. It's not the words, it's what's implied!"

Roberta shrugs. "Truth is truth. Implications are subjective. People will hear your words and draw their own conclusions."

"Don't try to doublethink me, Roberta. I'm not as stupid or naive as you'd like to think."

Then the expression on Roberta's face changes; she becomes coolly direct. No more posturing. "This is what is required of you, so this is what you will do. Or perhaps you've forgotten our arrangement. . . ." It's a threat as thinly veiled as the sheerest silk. Then out of nowhere they hear—

"What arrangement?"

They both turn to see Cam coming out into the garden. Roberta throws Risa a warning glance, and Risa looks down to the crumpled piece of paper at her feet, saying nothing.

"Her spine, of course," Roberta says. "In return for very expensive and state-of-the-art spinal replacement surgery, Risa has agreed to become a part of the Proactive Citizenry family. And every member of the family has a role to play." Then she holds out the paragraph to Risa

again. Risa knows she has no choice but to take it. She looks to the video crew, who wait impatiently to do their job, then back to Roberta.

"Do you want me to stand beside the wheelchair?" Risa asks.

"No, you should sit in it," Roberta tells her, "then rise halfway through. That will be more effective, don't you think?"

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"I was paralyzed—a victim of the clapper attack at Happy Jack Harvest Camp. I used to hate the very idea of unwinding, then overnight *I* was the one with a desperate medical need. Without unwinding, I would have been denied a new spine. Without unwinding, I would be confined to this wheelchair for the rest of my life. I was a state ward. I was an AWOL. I was a paraplegic—but now I'm none of those things. My name is Risa Ward, and unwinding changed my life."

—paid for by the National Whole Health Society

Risa has always thought of herself as a survivor. She managed the treacherous waters of Ohio State Home 23 until the day she became a "budget cut" and was pruned for unwinding. Then she survived as an AWOL, then at harvest camp, and then even survived a devastating explosion that should have killed her. Her strength has always been her keen mind and her ability to adapt.

Well, adapt to this:

A life of minor celebrity, all the comforts you could desire, a smart and charming boy infatuated with you . . . and the abandonment of everything you believe, along with the abdication of your conscience.

Risa sits on a plush lawn chair in the backyard of the cliffside estate, looking out at the tropical sunset, pondering these things and trying to infuse perspective and peace back into her mind. There's a powerful surge against her soul, as relentless as the waves crashing below, reminding her that in time the strongest of mountains is eroded into the sea, and she doesn't know how much longer she can resist it, or even if she should.

There was a news interview this morning. She tried to answer questions in a way so that she never actually had to lie. It's true that her support of unwinding is "a matter of necessity," but no one but she

and Roberta know what has made it so necessary. No matter how hard she tries, though, things come out of her mouth that she can't believe she's said. *Unwinding is the least of all evils.* Is there actually a part of her that believes that? The constant manipulation has left her internal compass spinning so wildly, she's afraid she'll never find true north again.

Exhausted, she dozes, and it seems only seconds later she's awakened by someone gently shaking her shoulder. It's night now—just the slightest trace of blue on the horizon holds the memory of dusk.

"Sawing wood," Cam says. "I didn't know you snored."

"I don't," she says groggily. "And I'm sticking to my story."

Cam has a blanket with him. It's only as he wraps it around her that she realizes how chilled she has gotten while she slept. Even in this tropical environment, the air can get cool at night.

"I wish you wouldn't spend so much time alone," he says. "You don't have to, you know."

"When you've spent most of your life in a state home, solitude feels like a luxury."

He kneels beside her. "We have our first interview together next week—they're flying us to the mainland—has Roberta told you?"

Risa sighs. "I know all about it."

"We're supposed to be a couple. . . ."

"So I'll smile and do my job for the camera. You don't have to worry."

"I was hoping you wouldn't see it as a job."

Rather than looking at him, she looks up to see a sky full of stars—even fuller than the sky over the Graveyard, but there, she rarely had the time or the inclination to look heavenward.

"I know all their names," Cam offers. "The stars, that is."

"Don't be ridiculous; there are billions of stars, you can't know them all."

"Hyperbole," he says. "I guess I'm exaggerating—but I do know all the ones that matter." Then he begins pointing them out, his voice taking on just the slightest Boston accent as he accesses the living star chart in his head. "That's Alpha Centauri, which means 'foot of the

centaur.' It's one of the closest stars to us. That bright one to the right? That's Sirius—the brightest star in the sky. . . ."

His voice begins to feel hypnotic to her, and it brings her a hint of the peace she's been craving. *Am I making this more difficult than it has to be?* Risa wonders. *Should I find a way to adapt?*

"That dim one is Spica, which is actually a hundred times brighter than Sirius, but it's much farther away. . . ."

Risa has to remind herself that her choice to get with Proactive Citizenry's program was not out of selfishness—so shouldn't her conscience be appeased? And if not—if her conscience is the only thing dragging her to dark depths, shouldn't she be able to cut it loose in order to survive?

"That's Andromeda, which is actually a whole galaxy. . . ."

There is a sense of arrogance to Cam's bragging, but also an innocence to it, like a little kid wanting to show off what he learned in school that day. But he never learned any of this, did he? The accent with which he now speaks makes it clear that the information was someone else's that got shoved into his head.

Stop it, Risa! she tells herself. Perhaps it's time to let the mountain erode, and so to spite the part of herself that would resist, she gets out of her chair and lies on the grass beside him, looking up at the spray of stars.

"Polaris is always easy to find. It's directly over the North Pole—so if you know where it is, you can always find true north." Hearing him say that makes her gasp. He turns to look at her. "Aren't you going to shut me up?"

Risa laughs at that. "I was hoping you'd put me back to sleep."

"Oh, am I that boring?"

"Only slightly."

Then he reaches over and gently brushes her arm.

Risa pulls away and sits up. "Don't! You know I don't like to be touched."

"Is it that you don't like to be touched . . . or that you don't like to be touched by me?"

She doesn't answer him. "What's that one?" she asks, pointing. "The red one?"

“Betelgeuse,” he tells her. Then, after an awkward silence, he says, “What was he like?”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

Risa sighs. “It’s not a place you want to go, Cam.”

“Maybe I do.”

She doesn’t have the strength to fight it, so she lies back down and fixes her eyes on the stars as she speaks. “Impulsive. Brooding. Occasionally self-loathing.”

“Sounds like a real gem.”

“You didn’t let me finish. He’s also clever, loyal, passionate, responsible, and a strong leader, but is too humble to admit all that to himself.”

“Is?”

“Was,” she says, covering. “Sometimes it feels like he’s still here.”

“I think I would have liked to have known him.”

Risa shakes her head. “He’d hate you.”

“Why?”

“Because he was also jealous.”

Silence falls between them again, but this time it’s not awkward at all.

“I’m glad you shared that with me,” Cam says. “There’s something I’d like to share with you, too.”

Risa has no idea what he’s going to say, but she finds she’s actually curious.

“Did you know a kid named Samson when you were back at the state home?” he asks.

She searches her thoughts. “Yes—he was on the harvest camp bus with me.”

“Well, he had a secret crush on you.”

At first it boggles Risa how he would know this, and when the truth dawns on her, a surge of reflexive adrenaline triggers her fight-or-flight response. She gets up, fully prepared to run back to the mansion, or jump off the cliff, or whatever it will take to get away from this revelation, but Cam eclipses her like a moon before one of his precious stars.

"Algebra!" he says. "He was a math whiz. I got the part of him that does algebra. It's just a tiny part, but when I came across your picture, well, I guess it was enough to make me stop and take notice. Then, when Roberta heard that you'd been captured, she pulled strings to get you here. For me. So it's my fault that you're here."

She doesn't want to look at him, but she can't stop. It's like looking at a traffic accident. "How am I supposed to feel about this, Cam? I can't pretend not to be horrified! I'm here because of some whim you had, but that whim wasn't even yours! It was that poor kid's!"

"No, it wasn't like that," says Cam quickly. "Samson was like . . . like a friend who taps you on the shoulder to get your attention . . . but what I feel for you—it's all me. Not just algebra, but, well, the whole equation."

She turns her back to him, grabbing the blanket and wrapping it around herself. "I want you to go now."

"I'm sorry," he says, "but I didn't want there to be any secrets between us."

"Please leave."

He keeps his distance, but he doesn't go. " 'I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless.' Wasn't that the last thing he said to you? I feel it's my responsibility to make that wish come true."

And finally he goes inside, leaving her alone with way too many people's thoughts.

• • •

Ten minutes later Risa still stands with the blanket wrapped around her, not wanting to go inside, but the circular pattern of her own thoughts begins to nauseate her.

I can't give in to this—I must give in to this—I can't give in to this, over and over until she just wants to shut herself down.

When she finally steps into the house, she hears music, which is not unusual, but this music isn't being pumped through the sound system. Someone is playing classical guitar. The piece sounds Spanish, and although many things sound Spanish when played on a classical twelve-string, this has a definite flamenco feel.

Risa follows the tune to the main living room, where Cam sits, curled over the instrument, lost in the music he's playing. She didn't even know he played—but she shouldn't be surprised; he came loaded with a veritable full house of skills. Still, playing guitar like this requires the melding of many things: muscle memory, combined with cortical and auditory memory, everything linked through a brain stem capable of coordinating it all.

The music lulls her, disarms her, enchants her, and she begins to realize that these are not just other people's parts. Someone is pulling those parts together. For the first time Risa truly begins to see Cam as an individual, struggling to pull together the many gifts he's been given. He didn't ask for these things, and he couldn't refuse them if he wanted to. As horrified as she was by him five minutes ago, this new revelation soothes her. It compels her to sit at the piano across the room and begin a simple accompaniment.

When he hears her, he brings his instrument closer, and sits beside her. No words are spoken; instead they communicate through the rhythms and harmonies. He lets her take control of the piece, lets it evolve at her hand, then she seamlessly gives it over to him again. They could go on for hours, and soon realize that they actually have, but neither one wants to be the first to stop.

Maybe, Risa thinks, there is a way to make this life work, and maybe there's not—but right now, in the moment, there's nothing more wonderful than losing herself to the music. Until now, she had forgotten how good that feels.

OceanofPDF.com

47 · Audience

Back from commercial, the studio audience applauds on cue, as if the viewers at home missed something.

"For those of you just tuning in," says one of the show's hosts, "our guests today are Camus Comprix and Risa Ward."

The young man with multiple skin tones that are exotic yet pleasing to the eye waves to the audience with one hand. With the other he clasps the hand of the pretty girl next to him. The couple looks perfect—as if they were meant to be. Camus, the audience quickly learns, prefers to be called Cam. He's even more interesting to behold in person than in the many teaser ads they've seen—ads that prepared them for something mysterious and wonderful. But this boy isn't mysterious at all—just wonderful, and they are certainly not shocked by his appearance, because the ads have fermented shock into intoxicating curiosity.

The studio audience, as well as the audience at home, is more than primed, because they know this is something special—this is Cam's first major public appearance. And what better way to welcome him into the spotlight than on *Brunch with Jarvis and Holly*, a friendly, nonthreatening morning talk show? Everyone loves Jarvis and Holly, who are so funny together and are in such comfortable command of their fashionably decorated faux living room set.

"Cam, there's quite a controversy as to how you . . . 'came to be.' I wonder how you feel about that?" asks Holly.

"Not my problem," Cam says. "It used to bother me when people would say terrible things about me, but I came to realize it only matters what one person thinks."

"Yourself," Holly prompts.

"No, her," he says, and glances at Risa. The audience laughs. Risa offers a humble smile. Then Holly and Jarvis go into some cute little banter about who wears the pants in various relationships. Jarvis poses the next question.

“Risa, you’ve been through a lot yourself. A ward of the state, a rehabilitated AWOL . . . I’m sure our audience would love to know how you and Cam met.”

“I got to know Cam after my spinal surgery,” Risa tells the world. “It was the same clinic where he got put together. He came to see me every day to talk to me. Eventually I came to realize that . . .” She hesitates for a moment, perhaps choked up by her emotions. “I came to realize that his whole was greater than the sum of his parts.”

It is just the type of thing people love to hear. The whole audience releases a collective “Aw . . .” Cam smiles at Risa and clasps her hand tighter.

“We’ve all seen your public service announcements,” says Holly. “I still get chills when I see you rise out of that wheelchair.” Then she turns to the audience. “Am I right?” The audience applauds in agreement; then she turns back to Risa. “Yet I would think when you were an AWOL you must have been very much against unwinding.”

“Well,” says Risa, “who wouldn’t be against it when you’re the one being unwound?”

“So exactly when did your feelings change?”

Risa takes a visibly deep breath, and Cam squeezes her hand again. “It isn’t so much that they changed . . . but I found myself having to accept a broader perspective. If it hadn’t been for unwinding, Cam wouldn’t exist, and we wouldn’t be here together today. There’s always going to be suffering in the world, but unwinding takes suffering away from those of us”—she hesitates again—“those of us living meaningful lives.”

“So then,” Jarvis asks, “what would you say to kids out there who are AWOL?”

Risa looks down rather than at Jarvis when she speaks. “I would say if you’re running, then run—because you have every right to try to survive. But no matter what happens to you, know that your life has meaning.”

“Maybe even more meaning if they’re unwound?” prompts Jarvis.

“Maybe so.”

Then they segue into an introduction of a top fashion designer, here to present a whole new line of trend-setting patchwork clothes

inspired by Camus Comprix. Designs for men and women, boys and girls.

"We call it Rewind Chic," says the designer, and models parade out to gleeful applause.

OceanofPDF.com

48 · Risa

Once their appearance with Jarvis and Holly is over, Risa holds Cam's hand until they are backstage and out of view of the audience. Then she releases it in disgust. Not disgust at him, but at herself.

"What is it?" Cam asks. "I'm sorry if I did something wrong."

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

She looks for the bathroom but can't find it. This blasted studio set is a maze, and everyone from the interns to the crew stares at them as they pass, as if they're royalty. These people must get celebrities on this show every day, so what makes them any different? But she knows the answer to that: After a while a celebrity is just a celebrity, but there is only one Camus Comprix. He is the new golden child of humanity, and as for Risa, well, it's "gilt" by association.

Finally she finds the bathroom and locks herself in, sits on the toilet, and buries her head in her hands. To have to defend unwinding —to have to say that the world is a better place because innocent kids are being unwound—shreds her inside. Her self-respect, her integrity are gone. Now, not only does she wish she hadn't survived the explosion at Happy Jack, she wishes she had never been born at all.

Why are you doing this, Risa?

It's the voices of all the kids at the Graveyard. *Why?* It's the voice of Connor, accusing her, and rightfully so. She wishes she could explain her reasons to him, and the deal with the devil she made with Roberta. A she-devil with the power to build herself a perfect boy.

And perfect, he very well may be. At least by society's definition. Risa can't deny that with each day, Cam grows more and more into his potential. He's smart and strong, and has the capacity to be profoundly wise when he's not being profoundly self-centered. The fact that she's starting to see him as a real boy and not a piecemeal Pinocchio bothers her almost as much as the things she said today on camera.

There is an urgent banging at the bathroom door.

“Risa,” Cam calls, “are you okay? Please come out, you’re scaring me.”

“Leave me alone!” Risa shouts.

He says nothing more, but when she finally leaves the bathroom five minutes later, he’s still standing there, waiting. He would probably have waited all day and all night. She wonders whether such unyielding resolve came from his parts, or if it’s something he’s developed on his own.

She suddenly finds herself bursting into tears and throwing herself into his arms, not even knowing why. She wants to tear him to bits, yet she desperately wants him to comfort her. She wants to destroy everything he represents, and yet she wants to cry on his shoulder because she has no other shoulder to cry on. Around them, people ogle them, trying to be inconspicuous about it. Their hearts are warmed by what appears to be the embrace of two souls in love.

“Unfair,” he says. “They shouldn’t make you do these things if you’re not ready to do them.” And the fact that he, the subject of all this attention, understands her, empathizes with her, and is somehow on her side, confuses everything inside her even more.

“It’s not always going to be like this,” Cam whispers to her. She wants to believe that, but right now she can only imagine it being worse.

OceanofPDF.com

49 · Cam

There are things that Roberta hasn't told him. Her control over Risa is more than a mere matter of wills. It's not as simple as gratitude for a new spine, because Risa isn't grateful at all. It's very clear that her spine is a burden she wishes she didn't have to bear. Then why did she consent?

Every moment they're together the question hangs heavy in the air, but when he broaches the subject, all Risa says is, "It was something I had to do," and when he tries to probe deeper, she loses patience and tells him to stop pushing. "My reasons are my own."

He wants to believe that he's the reason why she's doing all the things she's doing—all these things that clearly go against her grain. But if there are any parts of him that are naive enough to believe that she'd do these interviews and ads for his sake, they are outnumbered by the parts of him that know better.

Their appearance on *Brunch with Jarvis and Holly* made it painfully clear that whatever pain Risa is feeling over her part in all this runs very deep. The fact that she allowed him to comfort her didn't change that. If anything, it made him feel a responsibility to get to the bottom of it—not just for his own sake, but for hers. For how could anything between them ever be real without a full disclosure?

It all comes down to the day she signed that consent form—but asking Roberta about it is a useless endeavor. Then Cam realizes he doesn't have to . . . because Roberta is the queen of surveillance videos.

"I need to see the surveillance records from April seventeenth," Cam tells the security guard he's most friendly with—the one he plays basketball with—after they return to Molokai.

"No can do," he tells Cam, right off the bat. "No one sees those without permission from you-know-who. Get her permission, and I'll show you whatever you want."

"She'll never know."

“Don’t matter.”

“But it’ll matter if I tell her I caught you trying to steal from the mansion.” That makes the guard stutter. “Allow me,” Cam says. “You say, ‘You son of a bitch, you can’t do that,’ and I say ‘Yes, I can, and who do you think she’ll believe, me or you?’ ” Then Cam hands him a flash drive. “So just put the files on this, and everyone’s life will be easier.”

The guard looks at him incredulously. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

And although Cam knows who he’s referring to, he says, “I’ve got lots of trees, you’ll have to be more specific.”

That evening the drive turns up in his desk drawer, packed with video files. He doubts he’ll have a basketball partner anymore, but it’s a small sacrifice to make. When it’s late enough to know he won’t be interrupted, he loads the files onto his personal viewer—and witnesses something he was never supposed to see. . . .

OceanofPDF.com

50 · Risa

April 17. Almost two months ago. Before the interviews and the public service announcements, before the operation that replaced Risa's severed spine.

Risa sits in her wheelchair in a sparse cell with nothing to occupy her time but her own thoughts. A consent form folded into a paper airplane lies on the floor beneath a oneway mirror.

She spends her time thinking about her friends. Of Connor, mostly. She wonders how he'll fare without her. Better, she hopes. If she could only get word to him that she's alive, that she hasn't been tortured at the hands of the Juvies—and that she's not even in their hands, but in the hands of some other organization.

Roberta comes in, as she did the day before, with a new consent form. She sits down at the table and slides the consent form and a pen toward Risa again.

She smiles at Risa, but it's the smile of a snake about to coil around its prey.

"Are you ready to sign?" she asks.

"Are you ready to see me fly another paper airplane?" Risa responds.

"Airplanes!" says Roberta brightly. "Yes, why don't we talk about airplanes? Particularly the ones in the aircraft salvage yard. The place you call the Graveyard. Let's talk about your many friends there."

At last, thinks Risa, *she's going to question me.* "Ask whatever you want," she says. "But if I were you, I wouldn't trust a thing I say."

"No need to ask you questions, dear," Roberta says. "We know all we need to know about the Graveyard. You see, we allow your little AWOL sanctuary to exist because it serves our needs."

"Your needs? You're telling me you control the Juvenile Authority?"

"Let's just say we have substantial sway. The Juvenile Authority has wanted to raid the Graveyard for quite a while, but we're the ones holding them back. However, if I give the word, the Graveyard will be

cleaned out, and all those children who you fought so valiantly to save will be transported to harvest camps and unwound."

Risa can sense the rug being pulled out from under her. "You're bluffing."

"Am I? I believe you know our inside man. His name is Trace Neuhauser."

The news completely blindsides her. "Trace?"

"He's provided us with all the information we need to make a takedown of the airplane Graveyard quick and painless." She pushes the consent form just an inch closer to Risa. "However, it never needs to happen. None of those AWOLs need be unwound. Please, Risa. Accept a new spine, and do all we ask of you. If you do, I will personally guarantee that all seven hundred nineteen of your friends will be unharmed. Help *me*, Risa, and you'll save *them*."

Risa looks at the paper, seeing it in a terrible new light. "What types of things?" she asks. "What types of things will you ask me to do?"

"It will begin with Cam. You will put aside your feelings, whatever they may be, and learn to be kind to him. As for what other things we may ask of you, you will know when it is your time to know."

She waits for Risa's response, but she has none. The shrapnel of this bombshell has yet to come to rest.

Risa's silence seems to satisfy Roberta, so she stands, leaving Risa with the form and the pen. "As you pointed out before, I won't take away your choice—it remains in your rights to refuse . . . but if you do, I hope you can live with the consequences."

• • •

Risa holds the pen in her hand and reads the document for the fourth time. A single page filled with incomprehensible legalese. She doesn't need to decipher the fine print—it's pretty obvious what it says. By signing it, she gives her express permission to replace her damaged spine with a healthy one, harvested from an anonymous Unwind.

How many times has she imagined what it would be like to walk again? How many times has she relived that moment at Happy Jack

Harvest Camp when the roof collapsed and crushed her back, and wondered what it would be like to have that moment erased?

The way Risa saw it, however, the cost of the new spine would be her soul. Her conscience couldn't allow it, not then, not ever. Or so she thought.

If she looks at the big picture and refuses to sign it, she makes a personal statement against a world that's lost its way . . . but no one will ever know, and her statement will cause hundreds of her friends to be unwound.

Roberta claims that Risa has a choice, but what choice does she really have? She holds the pen firm, takes a deep breath, and signs her name.

OceanofPDF.com

51 · Cam

Roberta is overjoyed by the response to the *Jarvis and Holly* appearance. She's already fielded dozens of interview requests.

"We can afford to be choosy," she tells Cam the morning after he views the surveillance video. "Quality versus quantity!"

Cam says nothing, and Roberta is so wrapped up in her own plans, she fails to notice that Cam isn't himself.

You will put aside your feelings, whatever they may be, and learn to be kind to him.

He takes his frustration out alone on the basketball court, and when that doesn't calm him down, he takes it to the source. He searches the sprawling manor for Risa. He finds her in the kitchen, making herself a late-morning sandwich. "I get tired of being served all the time," she says casually. "Sometimes all I want is a PB&J that I make myself." She holds out the sandwich to him. "You want this one? I'll make another."

When he doesn't take it, she looks at his eyes and sees how off he is. "What's the matter? Have a fight with Mommy?"

"I know why you're here," he tells her. "I know all about your deal with Roberta, and your friends at the Graveyard."

She hesitates for a moment, then begins to eat her sandwich. "You have your deal with her, I have mine," she says in a peanut-butter-muffled voice. She tries to walk away, but Cam grabs her. She quickly pulls out of his grasp and pushes him against the wall. "I've come to accept it!" she yells at him. "So you might as well too!"

"So was it all just pretend? Was being nice to the freak just a performance to save your friends?"

"Yes!" snaps Risa. "At first."

"And now?"

"Do you really think so little of yourself? Do you really think I'm that good of an actress?"

“Then prove it!” he demands. “Prove that you feel anything but contempt for me!”

“Right now that’s all I feel for you!” Then she storms out, hurling her sandwich into the trash.

Five minutes later, Cam swipes a pass card from an inattentive guard and uses it to get past the security door into the garage. Then he steals a motorcycle and takes off down the winding path out of the estate.

He has no destination, just a burning need for acceleration. He’s sure there is at least one speed freak in his head, maybe more. He knows several of his constituents drove motorcycles. He takes every turn too fast until he finally gets to the town of Kualapuu, giving satisfaction to every self-destructive impulse that resides within him. Then he takes a turn too sharply, loses control, and flies from the bike, rolling over and over on the pavement.

He’s hurt, but he’s alive. Motorists stop and get out of their cars to help him, but he doesn’t want their help. He gets to his feet and feels a sharp pain in his knee. His back feels shredded; blood from beneath his hairline clouds his eyes.

“Hey, buddy, you okay?” yells some tourist. Then he stops short. “Hey! Hey, it’s you! You’re that rewind kid! Hey, look, it’s that rewind kid!”

He hurries away from them and gets on the motorcycle again, riding back the way he came. By the time he arrives, there are already police cars out front. Roberta sees him and runs to him.

“Cam!” she wails. “What did you do? What did you do? My God! You need medical attention! We’ll get the doctor right away!” Then she turns angrily to the house guards. “How could you let this happen?”

“It’s not their fault!” yells Cam. “I’m not a dog that got off its leash, so don’t treat me like one!”

“Let me look at your wounds. . . .”

“Back off!” he yells loudly enough for her to actually back off. Then he pushes past everyone, goes up to his room, and locks the world out.

A few minutes later there’s a gentle knocking at his door, as he knew there would be. Roberta, trying to handle her volatile boy with kid gloves. But it’s not Roberta.

"Open up, Cam, it's Risa."

She's the second-to-last person he wants to see right now, but the fact that she came surprises him. The least he can do is open the door.

She stands at his threshold with a first aid kit in her hand. "It's really stupid to bleed out just because you're pissed off."

"I'm not 'bleeding out.' "

"But you *are* bleeding. Can I at least take care of the worst of it? Believe it or not, I was the chief medic at the Graveyard. I dealt with stuff like this all the time."

He opens the door wider and lets her in. He sits at his desk chair and allows her to clean the wound on his cheek. Then she has him take off his torn shirt and begins cleaning his back. It stings, but he bears it without wincing.

"You're lucky," she tells him. "You have lacerations, but none of them need stitches, and you didn't tear any of your seams."

"I'm sure Roberta will be relieved."

"Roberta can go to hell."

For once Cam agrees with her. She takes a look at his knee and tells him that whether he likes it or not, he's going to need to have it x-rayed. When she's done assessing his wounds, he takes a good look at her. If she's still angry at him from before, it doesn't show. "I'm sorry," he says. "Going out like that was stupid."

"It was human," she points out.

Cam reaches out and gently touches her face. Let her slap him for it. Let her rip his arm out of its socket, he doesn't care.

But she doesn't do either of those things. "C'mon," she says. "Let's get you over to your bed so you can get some rest."

He stands but puts too much weight on his knee and almost goes down. She holds him, giving him support, the way he once gave her support on the first day she walked. She helps him all the way to the bed, and when he flops onto it, her arm is looped around him in such a way that she's pulled down onto the bed too.

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing for everything," she tells him. "Save it for your more important screwups."

Now they lie side by side on his bed, his aching back stinging even more pressed against the blanket. She could get up, but she doesn't. Instead she rolls slightly toward him and brushes her fingers across a scrape on his chest, checking to see if it needs a bandage, then determining it doesn't.

"You're quite the freak, Camus Comprix. How I got used to that is a mystery to me. I did, though."

"But you still wish I was never made, don't you?"

"But you were, and you're here, and I'm here with you." Then she adds, "And I only hate you sometimes."

"And other times?"

She leans toward him, thinks about it for a moment, then kisses him. It's more than a peck, but only slightly more. "Other times, I don't." Then she rolls onto her back and stays there beside him.

"Don't read too much into this, Cam," she tells him. "I can't be what you want."

"There are lots of things I want," he points out. "Who says I have to have all of them?"

"Because you're Roberta's spoiled little boy. You always get whatever your rewound heart desires."

Cam sits up so he can look at her. "So unspoil me. Teach me to be patient. Teach me that there are some things worth waiting for."

"And some things you might never have?"

He thinks about his answer, then says, "If that's what you have to teach me, then that's what I'll have to learn—but what I want most is something I think I can have."

"What might that be?"

He takes her hand and holds it. "This moment, right now, in a thousand different ways. If I can have that, then the rest won't matter as much."

She sits up and pulls her hand away from his, but only so she can brush it through his hair. She seems to be just looking at the wound on his scalp, but maybe not.

"If that's really what you want most," she says gently, "maybe you can have it. Maybe we both can."

Cam smiles. "I'd like that very much."

And for the first time since being wound, he feels tears welling in his eyes that he knows are truly his own.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Six

Fight or Flight

Google search: “Feral teenagers.” About 12,100 results (0.12 seconds)

Global Faultlines | World Politics, Political Economy, Contemporary . . . “Nihilistic and **feral teenagers**” the Daily Mail called them: the crazy youths from all walks of life who raced around the streets mindlessly and . . .

The Black Flag Cafe© • View topic - feral teenagers attack . . . 3 posts - 2 authors - Last post: Jul 7, 2007—**feral teenagers** attack once more..... » Fri Jul 06, 2007 10:31 pm. WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Two teenagers were accused of . . .

Feral007’s Blog—Random rants about feral teenagers » teenagers Random rants about **feral teenagers**. Day to day problems of a single parent with teenagers! What to do?

Feral Teenagers Attack Strangers in Philadelphia Aug 18, 2011—The word “wilding” refers to gangs of teenagers assaulting strangers for fun and . . .

“Feral” teenagers beat man to death - News - Wigan Today Apr 4, 2007—Two “**feral” teenagers** who subjected a harmless and deeply vulnerable Wigan man to months of bullying before savagely . . .

Silver Spring, Singular: Coveting thy Neighbor’s Restaurants Jun 30, 2010—Bethesda has far fewer packs of **feral teenagers**, which makes the whole downtown experience over there vastly more pleasant . . .

OceanofPDF.com

52 · Lev

Lev is woken by a burst of ice water in his face. At first he thinks he's out in the storm again. A tornado was coming—did he get hit by a tree? He has to get up. Must keep running. Running.

But he's not in the storm. He's not outside. His focus is blurry, but he can see enough to know he's in some sort of room, looking at a dirty wall. No, not a wall, a ceiling. A water-stained ceiling. And he's lying on a bed. And his hands are tied above his head. Tied to the bed frame. His mouth tastes like battery acid, the air smells like mildew, and his head pounds, pounds, pounds. Now he remembers! He was in a van with Miracolina. Hail was pummeling the van. Then they were tranq'd by—

"Awake?" Nelson says. Lev remembers his name now. Nelson. Officer Nelson. Lev had never seen the man's face, but his name was in the news almost as much as Lev's. He doesn't look much like a Juvey-cop now.

"Sorry for the water alarm. I'd have given you a wake-up call, but there's no phone service here."

On a bed next to Lev is Miracolina, still unconscious. Like him, her hands are tied to her bed frame with plastic cable ties.

Lev coughs up some water. Nelson sits a few feet away, his legs crossed, holding his tranq gun.

"You know, I've been staking out the Cavenaugh mansion for days. Just had a hunch. See, everything pointed to a major safe house in the area, but no one could nail down the location. But the Cavenaugh estate—there's that guard gate made to look abandoned that's not abandoned at all. And all those state-of-the art surveillance cameras in the trees that border the property. I didn't know the resistance had that kind of money!"

Lev says nothing, but Nelson doesn't seem to care. Apparently he's just happy to have a captive audience.

"So, imagine my surprise when I find you and your friend practically gift-wrapped by the side of the road!" Nelson pops the clip from his tranq gun, slides out the dart bullets one by one, then reloads it, snapping the clip back in. On the other bed, Miracolina groans, finally beginning to stir out of her deep sleep.

"Here's what I think." Nelson leans closer to Lev. "You were escorting this poor little AWOL girl to the Cavenaugh mansion and into the arms of your scofflaw friends, but on the way you got caught in the storm. Am I right?"

"Not even close," Lev croaks.

"Ah well, the particulars don't really matter. The point is, you're here."

"And where is here?"

"Like I said," says Nelson, waving the gun, "the particulars don't matter."

Lev looks over toward Miracolina again. Her eyes are half-open, but she's still not entirely conscious. "Let her go," he says. "She's got nothing to do with this."

Nelson smiles. "How noble of you—thinking of the girl before yourself. Who says chivalry is dead?"

"What do you want?" Lev asks, his head aching too much to dance around the point. "I can't get you your job back, and it's not my fault Connor tranqed you, so what do you want from me?"

"Actually," says Nelson, "it *is* your fault. If you weren't being used as a human shield, none of us would be here today."

Lev realizes how true that is. Had he not inadvertently taken Nelson's bullet meant for Connor, then both of them would have been unwound on schedule.

"So, shall we play?" Nelson asks.

Lev swallows, and his throat feels like it's coated with wood shavings. "What's the game?"

"Russian roulette! My clip is loaded with five tranq bullets and one nickel-plated lead shell with an explosive tip. I can't recall in what position I put Mr. Bad Bullet—I was too busy talking to you to notice. I will ask you questions, and if I don't like an answer, I shoot."

"This game could last for days if I keep going unconscious."

“Or it could be over very quickly.”

Lev takes a deep breath and tries not to show any more fear than he has to. “Sounds exciting. I’m in.”

“Well, it’s not quite the thrill of clapping, but I’ll try to keep you from getting bored.” He takes the safety off the weapon. “Question one. Is your friend Connor still alive?”

Lev suspected he might ask this, so he does his best to lie as honestly as he can. “I’ve heard the rumors too,” he says, “but I’m out of that loop. He was taken away, bloody and unconscious, from Happy Jack, and I was arrested. Beyond that, I have no idea.”

Nelson smiles at him, then says, “Wrong answer,” and swings the gun toward Miracolina.

“No!”

Nelson fires without hesitation. Miracolina arches her back as she’s hit, releasing a semiconscious gasp, then falls silent. Lev’s heart feels like it’s about to explode, until he sees the tiny telltale tranq flag sticking out of her shirt.

Nelson stands and shakes his head at Lev. “I’d better like your next answer.” Then he leaves, closing the door.

OceanofPDF.com

53 · Nelson

Nelson decides to give Lev plenty of time to think about it. In the meantime, he sits in an adjoining room of the cottage, researching the leads he already has. Not that many. He has tagged nearly a dozen AWOLs, letting them think they've escaped from him. Some are still on the streets not far from where he originally captured them. Others are at harvest camps, having been caught by the Juvies. One appears to be in Argentina, although he suspects the kid was caught by another parts pirate and unwound on the black market, which means only his tagged part went to South America. There are two signals pinging from Arizona at the site of an old defunct air force base. This he finds the most curious. He heard talk of some sort of AWOL sanctuary in the Southwest when he was still with the Juvies, but details were sketchy, and he hadn't had high enough security clearance to learn any more about it, or interest at the time to care. In any case, Arizona is too far away for him to jump to any conclusions. Unless, of course, his little clapper boy places Connor there.

The tranq bullets Nelson loaded in his pistol are the mildest kind, with the shortest half-life. When he returns about two hours later, he lingers outside the door, listening. The girl is awake but groggy, and Lev is all about apologizing for getting her involved in this. No talk of Connor or any potential AWOL hideouts.

Nelson kicks open the door for effect, then sits calmly in the chair between them, brandishing his pistol, just in case there's any question about his intentions.

"Are we ready?" Nelson says. "Five bullets left. A twenty percent chance that the next one is lethal."

Lev avoids eye contact with him, struggling to keep his breathing under control. As he already knows the surprise ending of the game, Nelson aims the gun at the girl even before asking the question.

"You think I'm afraid to die, but I'm not," the girl says. However, the warble in her voice says otherwise.

"Please," Lev begs. "You don't have to do this."

"I believe I do," Nelson cheerfully tells him. He clears his throat. "Round two. The question is . . . Where is the Akron AWOL hiding? You have three seconds before the buzzer."

"Please don't," Lev pleads again.

"One!"

"Turn it on me! She has nothing to do with this!"

"Two!"

"I'm the one with the wrong answers! Not her!"

"Three!"

"No! Wait! I'll tell you! I'll tell you!"

He cocks the trigger. "Better make it quick."

Lev takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Indian Echo Caverns. In Pennsylvania. It's where the AWOLs from the East Coast are hidden. They take them deep in the caverns and keep them there until they turn seventeen. Connor's helping them run it."

"Hmm," says Nelson, considering it. "It's on an Indian rez. I'll bet stinking Slotmongers are always giving sanctuary to AWOLs."

He puts the gun across his lap and leans back in his chair. "Now I have a dilemma. Of all the AWOLs I've tagged, none of them have gone in that direction. So who should I believe? You or my data?"

"Where were you tagging them?" Lev asks quickly. "If they're west of Pittsburgh, they probably go someplace else if the resistance picks them up—and don't ask me where, because I don't know!"

Nelson smiles. "You know, I'm so glad you didn't blow yourself to smithereens last year, young man. Because you've just saved this girl's life. Assuming, of course, that you're telling the truth."

"If I'm lying," says Lev, "you can come back and kill us both."

That makes Nelson laugh. "If it turns out you're lying, I would have done that anyway, but thank you for giving me permission."

Then he leaves, making no attempt to free them from their bonds.

OceanofPDF.com

54 · Lev

"Were you telling the truth?" Miracolina asks,

"Of course I was," Lev says, just in case Nelson is still listening. A few moments later he hears Nelson's van start and drive off. The fact is, it hadn't mattered what Lev told him—what mattered was Nelson believing it. Lev pulled the location out of his memory—he had been to Indian Echo Caverns with his family many years before. He remembered the guide saying that it used to be a hideout for outlaws. Lev stayed close to his mother, fearing that those outlaws might still be lurking in shadowy crevices. Lev has no idea if AWOLs really are hiding there. He hopes not, now that he's unleashed Nelson on the place.

"So what do we do?" Miracolina asks. "If he catches your friend, he won't be back, and we'll starve to death, and if your friend's not there, he'll come back and kill us."

"I thought you weren't afraid of dying."

"I'm not. I just don't want to die a senseless death."

"We won't. Not if I can help it." Then he begins to roll back and forth on his bed. His hands are secured tightly to two of the metal bedposts with the cable ties, but his feet are able to build a kind of rocking momentum. He throws his weight left, then right, over and over again, and the bed begins to scrape on the ground beneath him as he does. He tries to flip the bed but can't build the momentum, and eventually he has to rest.

"It's not working," Miracolina says, stating what's more than obvious.

"Then maybe you should start praying. I sure am."

After a few minutes' rest, he tries it again. This time he's able to slide the bed over a little bit more with his rocking, until one of the legs catches on an uneven floorboard. Now when he rocks the bed, the legs on the other side rise slightly off the ground. He loses his strength, and the pain of the plastic ties digging into his wrists gets to

him. He has to stop, but after a few minutes of recovery he tries again, and again, each time getting closer to the exact force, and the exact torque it will take. Then finally, releasing a clenched-jawed groan, he hurls all his weight toward the far wall, practically wrenching his arms out of their sockets—and the bed rises, its future dangling like a coin between heads and tails—and then it flips upside down. The metal frame and the mattress land on top of him. Lev's elbows smash painfully on the rotting wooden floor, splinters digging in. With the bed lying on top of him, he has a momentary flashback to the explosion in the town house and being pinned beneath the sofa. His brother's face, and Pastor Dan's. He tries to draw strength from the moment, rather than let himself be overwhelmed by grief.

"You did it! That was great!" he can hear Miracolina saying, although he can't see her. "Now what?"

"Not sure yet."

Lev's hands are still painfully tied to the metal headboard bars. He can see how badly his wrists are bleeding, and there's rust on his hands too. He thinks about tetanus, and how they always want you to get a tetanus shot when you step on a rusty nail or something. He thinks about how, at his family's beach home, the iron fence had rusted into nothing from exposure to salt air. *Rusted into nothing* . . . He looks to where the headboard bars connect to the bed frame. The bar to which his left hand is attached is practically rusted all the way through. Ignoring the pain again, he tugs and he tugs until finally the pole breaks and his hand comes free.

"What's going on down there?" Miracolina asks.

He reaches up and grabs her hand instead of telling her, and she gasps.

The bar that secures his right hand is not in the same weak state as the other, but it is rusty also, and rough. He knows he can't break this pole like the other one, so he tries a different tactic. He begins to move his wrist back and forth, scraping the plastic tie against the jagged, rusted metal. Bit by bit the plastic is worn away, until finally the tie shreds apart and his hand comes free. He wipes the blood from his wrists on the mattress and stands up.

"How did you do it?" she asks.

"Superpowers," he tells her. He looks at Miracolina's bonds, then reaches beneath her mattress to find the same rusted metal. He pulls the bed away from the wall and, standing behind it, kicks at the bars until the ones Miracolina are attached to break free. She pulls her hands away, peeling the plastic loops over her knuckles.

"You okay?" Lev asks, and she nods. "Good. Let's get out of here." But the moment he puts weight on his right ankle, he grimaces and starts to limp.

"What is it?" Miracolina asks.

"I think I sprained my ankle kicking out the bars," Lev tells her. She lets him put his weight on her, and she helps him walk.

As they open the front door, it becomes clear where they're being held. It's a cottage in the woods, so isolated they could have screamed at the top of their lungs for days and no one would have heard them.

There's a dirt path leading out to what Lev hopes is a major road. He tries putting weight on his ankle and grimaces again—so she continues to let him put his arm over her shoulder, and he gratefully accepts her assistance.

Then, when they're a good distance away from the shack, he says, "I'm really going to need your help now. You have to help me warn my friend."

She steps away from him, and he almost topples, but manages to keep his balance.

"I'll do no such thing. Your friend is not my problem."

"Please, look at me. I can barely walk—I can't make it there on my own."

"I'll get you to a hospital."

Lev shakes his head. "When I went to Cavenaugh, I broke the terms of my parole. If I get caught, I'll get locked away for good."

"Don't blame me for that!"

"I just saved your life," Lev reminds her. "Don't repay me by destroying mine."

She looks at him almost as hatefully as the day they first met. "That parts pirate will get to the caverns before we do. What's the point?" Then she studies him for a moment as if reading Lev's mind, and says, "Your friend's not in the caverns, is he?"

“No.”
She sighs. “Of course not.”

OceanofPDF.com

55 · Miracolina

Miracolina is not a girl given to impulsive behavior. All things must be planned and have sufficient time to settle before being carried out. Even her escape from the Cavenaugh mansion was not a wild bolt, but the result of careful preparation. Therefore, she is completely unprepared for the madness that overtakes her as she stands in that dirt path with Lev.

"I will contact my parents before I help you get anywhere," she tells him, realizing that by saying this, she's entered into negotiation. She's actually considering going with him. Perhaps it's post-traumatic stress disorder.

"You can't call your parents. If you do, they'll know your tithing bus wasn't attacked by parts pirates. It will compromise the entire Cavenaugh operation."

"If you care so much about it," she asks him, "then why did you run?"

He takes a moment before answering, shifting his weight and grimacing again. "Their work is good," he says. "It just isn't mine."

This baffles her. His motives—his hazy integrity. It was easy to dismiss Lev as "part of the problem" when she did not know him, but now it's not so easy. He's a paradox. This is a boy who almost blew himself to bits in an attempt to kill others, and yet he offered himself to the parts pirate in order to save Miracolina's life. How could someone go from having no respect for one's own existence to being willing to give himself as a sacrifice for someone he barely knows? It flies in the face of the truths that have defined Miracolina's life. The bad are bad, the good are good, and being caught in between is just an illusion. There is no gray.

"I will contact my parents and let them know that I am alive," she demands, holding firm. "Just knowing I'm alive will make them happy."

"A call can be traced."

"We'll be moving, won't we? If my parents report it to the Juvenile Authority, they'll only know where we've been, not where we're going." And then she asks, "Where *are* we going?"

"I guess you can get in touch with your parents," Lev says, giving in, "but don't ask where we're going. The less you know, the better."

And although that sends a red warning flag flying to the top of her mast, she says, "Fine." Then she puts her hands on her hips. "And you can stop pretending your ankle hurts. That will just slow us down."

Lev puts his full weight on the ankle and offers her up an impish little grin. It's in this moment that Miracolina realizes she lost this negotiation before it began. Because even before he asked her to come along with him, a part of herself—secret even to her—had already decided that she would.

OceanofPDF.com

56 · Lev

The journey to the Graveyard is different for Lev than his first time. That first trek had no definite destination beyond a slow downward spiral, and was made while his wounded spirit was so raw, he had been ripe for recruitment by the Clappers. He had been lost with no real way to cope with his anger.

First there was CyFi, and the kid in CyFi's head who didn't even know he had already been unwound. Then Lev was left alone to fend for himself, prey for bottom-feeders as stealthy as mosquitoes. They would offer help, or shelter, or food—but they all had some bloodsucking agenda. A brief stint in a Chance folk rez bolstered his strength, but even that ended with a nasty run-in with a parts pirate. Lev's time surviving under the radar had made him street-smart and resourceful. He had been toughened by a brutal baptism of life experience. In those bleak days, the idea of blowing himself up and taking as much of the world with him as he could didn't sound like such a bad idea.

But he is not in that dark place now, and he knows that no matter what happens to him, he'll never be in that place again.

To honor Miracolina's wishes, Lev slips a cell phone out of the coat pocket of a businessman so she can call home. The call is brief, and as promised, she gives no more information than the fact that she's alive, cutting off her mother's rapid-fire inquiry by quickly hanging up.

"There, are you happy?" she snaps at Lev. "Short and sweet." She insists he return the phone to the same businessman's pocket, but he's long gone, so he drops it in the pocket of a similar man.

With no money of their own, everything they need must be stolen. Lev uses milder versions of the survival tricks he learned his first time on the streets. Smash and grab without the smash. Breaking and entering without any actual breaking. Oddly, Miracolina has no problem with them stealing.

“I am making a list of all the things we take, and where we take them from,” she tells him. “All will be paid for in full before I am unwound.”

However, the fact that she is allowing for the bending of her personal moral code gives Lev hope that it may bend enough to break her of her tithing fixation.

He knows that time is of the essence. Nelson is the kind of human bloodhound who won’t give up—and he’ll be even more relentless once he realizes Lev has lied to him. They have to warn Connor.

Neither Lev nor Miracolina can drive, or look old enough to get away with it if they could—and kids their age traveling on conventional transportation stick out like sore thumbs. So they ride in the shadows of the world. The containers of eighteen-wheelers, when they can get inside; the beds of pickups when there are tarps under which to hide. More than once they’re chased away, but never seriously pursued. Luckily, most people have more important things to do than run after a couple of kids.

“I hate what we’re doing, and how we’re doing it!” Miracolina yells, after running from a particularly aggressive trucker who chased them with a tire iron for all of ten yards. “I feel dirty! I feel subhuman.”

“Good,” Lev tells her. “Now you know how a real AWOL feels.”

He has to admit that being back on the fringe is exhilarating. That first time it was all about betrayal, alienation, and survival. He hated it, and still has nightmares about it—but now giving in to instincts, impulses, and the rush of adrenaline feels far more like home than being a caged bird in the Cavenaugh mansion. Some of that survival excitement seems to be rubbing off on Miracolina—for every time they get away with something, she loosens up. She even smiles.

The longest leg of their journey is in the baggage compartment of a Greyhound bus—having climbed in behind luggage when no one was looking. The bus, out of Tulsa, is bound for Albuquerque, just one state away from their destination.

“Are you ever going to tell me where this journey ends?”

“We’re going to Tucson,” he finally tells her, but nothing more specific than that.

The bus leaves at five in the evening and will travel through the night. They create a reasonably comfortable place for themselves among the luggage. Then, about two hours into the trip, Lev realizes he's in trouble. Even in the pitch dark of the cramped compartment, Miracolina can tell something's wrong, because she asks, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Lev says. Then he confesses. "I gotta pee."

"Well," says Miracolina in a superior voice that must have taken years to cultivate, "*I* thought ahead and went at the bus station."

Within ten minutes Lev realizes this is not going to end well.

"Are you going to wet your pants?" Miracolina asks.

"No!" says Lev. "I'd rather blow up."

"So I've heard."

"Very funny."

But as the bus hits a patch of rough road, it becomes painfully clear that holding it in is not an option. He will not foul the compartment . . . then he realizes that absorbency is only a luggage zipper away. He moves away from Miracolina and begins to unzip a suitcase.

"You're going to pee in someone's suitcase?"

"Do you have any other ideas?"

And suddenly Miracolina begins to snicker, then giggle, then cackle uncontrollably. "He's going to pee in someone's suitcase!"

"Quiet! Do you want the people in the bus to hear you?"

But Miracolina is beyond help. She's entered into a full-fledged laughter fit—the kind that leaves your stomach hurting. "They're gonna open their suitcase," she blurts between bursts of glee, "*and their clothes'll be full of pee!*

For Lev this is no laughing matter. He opens the suitcase and feels around to make sure it's just clothes and nothing electronic, because that would be really bad—and Miracolina can't catch her breath. *"And I thought it was bad when shampoo spilled in mine!"*

"Shampoo!" says Lev. "You're a genius."

Lev rifles blindly through one suitcase, then a second, until he comes up with a nice-size shampoo bottle. Then he frantically dumps the shampoo out in the corner of the luggage compartment and,

without a second to lose, refills it with sweet relief. When he's done, he caps the bottle tightly. He considers putting it back in the suitcase, but decides it's best to just leave it rolling around at the far corner of the luggage compartment.

Lev releases a shivering sigh, then returns to his space next to Miracolina.

"Did you wash your hands?" she asks.

"Wash them?" Lev tells her. "They're covered with shampoo!"

Now they're both laughing, and when they breathe in, the cloying smell of cherry blossom shampoo fills the air around them, which just makes them laugh harder, until they're all laughed out.

And in the silence that falls afterward, something changes. The tension that has been strung taut between them since the moment they met now goes slack. Soon the motion of the bus begins lulling them to sleep. Lev feels Miracolina lean into his shoulder. He doesn't move for fear of waking her. He just enjoys the feeling of her there—certain that she would never do such a thing if she were awake.

And then she says, with no hint of sleep in her voice, "I forgive you."

Lev feels it begin deep inside him, just as it did on the day he realized his parents would never take him back. It's an emotional swell that can't be contained, and there's no bottle in the world big enough to hold it. And although he fights to keep his sobs silent, his chest begins to heave with them, and he knows he won't be able to stop any more than Miracolina was able to stop laughing. Although she must know he's racked with tears, she says nothing, just keeps her head on his shoulder as his tears fall into her hair.

All this time, Lev never realized what he needed. He did not need to be adored or pitied. He needed to be forgiven. Not by God, who is all-forgiving. Not by people like Marcus and Pastor Dan, who would always stand by his side. He needed to be forgiven by an unforgiving world. By someone who once despised him. Someone like Miracolina.

Only once his silent sobs have stopped does she speak to him. "You're so weird," she says. He wonders if she has any idea of the gift she has just given him. He's pretty sure she does.

Lev knows his world is different now. Maybe it's exhaustion, or stress, but in that rattling, bouncing, greasy, shampooey compartment, his life suddenly feels like it couldn't be any better.

Both he and Miracolina close their eyes and fall asleep, blissfully unaware of the brown van with a dented roof and shattered side window that has been following the bus since it left Tulsa.

OceanofPDF.com

57 · Connor

"Chatter," Hayden tells Connor. "All kinds of chatter."

Hayden paces the tight space in Connor's jet, hitting his head on the ceiling more than once. Connor has rarely seen Hayden this agitated. Until now, he always managed to keep the world at smirking distance.

"Is it just on the Tucson police bands, or the juvey bands too?"

"Everywhere," Hayden tells him. "Radio, e-mails, every communication we can intercept. The analysis programs have us shooting to red alert."

"They're just programs," Connor reminds him. "It doesn't necessarily mean—"

"There's chatter specifically about us. Code words mostly, but they're easy to crack."

Connor begins to wonder if his own paranoia has infected Hayden as well. "Just calm down and give me specifics."

"Okay," says Hayden, pacing and trying to slow his breathing. "There have been three house fires over the past two weeks. Three homes in different Tucson neighborhoods got burned to the ground, and they're blaming us for it."

Connor's grafted hand balls into a fist. That iron fist the Admiral had spoken of, perhaps. Didn't Trace say that there were people itching for a reason to take the Graveyard out? If they couldn't find a reason, it would be pretty easy to manufacture one.

"Where's Trace?" Connor asks. "If something's really going on, he would know."

Hayden just looks at him, confused. "Trace? Why would Trace know?"

"Never mind why, he just would. I have to talk to him."

Hayden shakes his head. "He's gone."

"What do you mean 'gone'?"

"No one's seen him since yesterday. I figured you sent him on some mission."

"Damn it!" Connor punches the wall, cracking the fiberglass interior of the corporate jet. So Trace finally decided which side he's on—and without him, they have no escape plan. No one but Trace can fly the Dreamliner.

"There's more," Hayden says, hesitating long enough for Connor to know that there's yet another round of bad news. "All three homes had Unwinds—and they burned the day before the Juvey-rounders were due to take them to Harvest camp. I checked, and the kids were on our list. And all three of them were storks."

• • •

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Connor doesn't hide his fury as he storms into GymBo, where Starkey works out like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't!"

Around them other kids leave their equipment and slowly approach, taking menacing positions. Only now does Connor realize that Starkey has completely surrounded himself with members of the Stork Club. There's not a single bio-raised kid there.

"How many of you were with him?" Connor demands. "How many of you are as crazy as he is?"

"Let me show you something, Connor." Starkey saunters over to a kid sitting on a side bench, who looks both angry and scared at the same time. "I'd like you to meet Garrett Parks, the newest member of the Stork Club. We liberated him last night."

Connor looks the kid over. He has a black eye, a swollen lip. He was pretty roughed up during his "liberation."

"They burned down your house—you know that, don't you?" Connor asks him.

The kid can't look Connor in the eye. "Yeah, I know."

"He also knows," adds Starkey, "that his so-called parents were about to have him unwound. We saved him, and sent a message."

"Yeah, you sent a message, all right. To the Juvies. You told them that it's time to take every last one of us out. You didn't save him, you've condemned him. You've condemned all of us! Do you really think they'll stand for us burning down homes?"

Starkey crosses his arms. "Let them try to take us down. We've got weapons. We'll fight them off."

"How long do you think we can last? An hour? Two? No matter how many weapons we have, they have more, and they'll just keep coming and coming until we're all dead or captured."

Finally Starkey begins to show a hint of uncertainty.

"You're just a coward," shouts Bam, glowering at him just as she did the day Connor fired her.

"Yeah, yeah, a coward," the others echo.

The chorus of support gives Starkey all the justification he needs to bury any doubts beneath his own blind confidence. "I've been here long enough to know that you're nothing but a babysitter. We need more than that. We need someone who's not afraid to take this battle to the streets. I gave you every chance to leave on your own, but you wouldn't go. You leave me no choice but to take you down."

"Not gonna happen."

Connor is clearly outnumbered. Starkey's inner circle of storks advance on him—but Starkey's not the only one with tricks up his sleeve. Suddenly Hayden and half a dozen others, who've been waiting outside, begin piling through the door, firing tranq pistols at every stork in their path until half of Starkey's inner circle is unconscious on the floor of the jet, and the others drop their weapons.

Connor looks straight into Starkey's eyes. "Cuff him."

"With pleasure," says Hayden, pulling Starkey's hands behind his back and cuffing them together.

Connor has been foolish enough to trust him, and to believe that Starkey's ambition was healthy, not blind.

"The difference between me and you, Connor," Starkey says, still defiant, "is that—"

"—is that you're in handcuffs and I'm not. Get him out of here."

Hearing the gunfire of tranq pistols, dozens of kids have gathered in front of GymBo, as they haul Starkey out and down the stairs.

"Put his little mutiny team in the detention jet with two armed guards," Connor says.

"Starkey, too?" Hayden asks.

Connor knows he can't put Starkey in the same holding pen as his coconspirators. It would just lead to more plotting.

"No. Lock him in *my* jet," Connor orders, and one of the kids holding Starkey throws him to the ground, but Connor pulls the kid back.

"No! We are not the Juvies. Treat him with dignity. Whether he deserves it or not."

They obey, although no one helps Starkey up. With his hands cuffed behind his back, he has to wiggle and contort himself to get to his feet.

"This isn't over!" Starkey yells.

"Yeah, that's what they always say when it is."

Starkey is taken away, and Connor begins damage control. He tunes in to the rumbles of conversation on the perimeter. Some kids are just wondering what the hell happened, but there are other voices. Disapproving voices. The Stork Club. He wonders how much support Starkey has. It might be a mile wide, but Connor hopes it's only an inch deep.

"Listen to me, all of you," Connor says, knowing he has to sell himself as their leader more than ever. "Whether you're a stork, or a ward, or bio-raised, we have to stand united now. What we do now will decide whether we live or die. The Juvies are about to make a move. We have to work together, unless you want to end up in pieces."

His speech meets with affirmations and a sense of solidarity until someone in the back asks, "What about Starkey?"

Then everyone waits to see what Connor will say.

"Starkey is one of us," Connor tells them. "And I won't let a single one of us be unwound."

• • •

With no one to fly the Dreamliner, there is no escape plan, so Connor calls together Hayden, Ashley, and half a dozen others—some from the

Holy of Whollies, and other kids he knows he can trust. They meet in the ComBom—a makeshift war room for an unlikely general—and Connor pulls plan B out of thin air.

"We set up two fronts—here, and here." He points to a hand-drawn map of the Graveyard. "The Juvies will come in through the north gate. Once they're in, we drive them right down the main aisle, then ambush from both sides, with about fifty of us."

"Live ammo?" Hayden asks.

"We hit them with everything we have. Live ammo, tranqs, everything."

"They'll have more than us," Ashley points out. "No matter what we do, they'll outlast us."

"Yes, but it's all about buying time," Connor tells her. "When our ammo runs low, we retreat to here—behind the fuel tanker, east of the fighter jets."

"Won't they corner us?" another kid asks.

"When they start to close in, we blow the tanker and run east."

"We'll never make it!" says Ashley.

"Here's the thing, though. The second the fifty take on the Juvies, more than six hundred fifty will be scattering to the south." And on the map, Connor draws a dispersal pattern of kids spreading out like a fan toward the remote southern fence. "That fence is full of holes."

Hayden nods, getting it, and points to the main aisle. "So if the fifty do their job here and then draw the Juvies to the east, keeping them engaged and distracted, by the time they realize everyone else is on the run, they'll never be able to catch them."

"They might be able to round up some, but the others will make it. They'll all be on their own again, but at least they'll be alive, and whole."

And then comes the big question. "What about the fifty?"

Finally Connor has to answer. "We'll be the sacrifices so the others can survive."

He can actually hear the click in Hayden's Adam's apple as he swallows. "So much for a future in broadcasting," Hayden says.

"Any of you who aren't up for it, I won't hold it against you if you leave," Connor says, but everyone knows that's like the minister asking

if anyone objects to the wedding.

"All right, good," he says when no one raises a hand. "Each of you put together a team of your most trusted friends who are willing to stand against the Juvies, then let the others know to start running when the alarm sounds, and not to stop running until they're either caught or turn seventeen."

"Why wait until the alarm sounds?" someone asks. "Why not abandon the Graveyard now?"

"Because," Connor points out, "they're watching our every move now. If they see us starting to bail, they'll have squad cars lining that perimeter fence before we even get there, and they can pick us off like rabbits—but if all their forces are tied up in a single forward offensive, that's when we'll have a back door."

They all approve of Connor's logic. He seems to be the only one who knows he's flying by the seat of his pants.

"How much time do we have?" Ashley asks.

Connor lets Hayden field that one.

"Days if we're lucky," Hayden tells her. "Hours if we're not."

OceanofPDF.com

58 · Trace

While Connor has his summit meeting, Trace breaks all speed limits racing back to the Graveyard. He had been called for an emergency meeting with his "employers," to confirm that Graveyard AWOLs were responsible for the house fires in Tucson. There was enough evidence to lay the attacks on the Graveyard's doorstep—it made no sense to deny it. What the suits from Proactive Citizenry wanted to know was why Trace hadn't told them about these attacks ahead of time. After all, that was his entire purpose there—to let them know everything before it happened. They refused to believe that he had been just as blindsided by it as they were.

"Do you have any idea the position this puts us in?" they asked him. "The Juvenile Authority wants to clean the place out, and with these attacks on civilian neighborhoods, we won't be able to stop them."

"I thought you controlled them."

The suits bristled in unison. "Our relationship with the Juvenile Authority is more complex than your simplistic boeuf understanding." Then they told him they were ending his assignment, effective immediately.

But to Trace, this wasn't an assignment anymore. And the time of playing both sides had come to an end.

So, preparing himself for battle, he sped off to the Graveyard like a surfer riding ahead of a tsunami.

Now, at dusk, he screeches to a halt before the locked gate and honks nonstop until the two teen guards on duty come out to see what the commotion is. When they see it's Trace, they unlock the gate.

"Jesus, Trace, do you want to wake all of Tucson?"

The other kid on duty chuckles. "Ain't nothing gonna wake Tucson."

Poor bastards, thinks Trace. *They have no idea what's coming.* He looks at the rifles they wield limply, like fashion accessories. "You got tranq bullets in those?" he asks.

“Yup,” says the first kid.

“Replace them with these.” Trace reaches over onto his passenger seat of his Jeep and hands them two boxes of the deadliest military ammunition made. Shells that could take the head off an elephant.

The kids look at the shells like they’ve been handed a newborn they’re afraid they’ll drop.

“Load them quick—and the next time you see someone headed for the gate, shoot first, and don’t stop until you’re out of bullets, do you hear me?”

“Y-yes, sir,” says the first kid. The other kid just nods mutely. “Why, sir?”

“Because the Juvies are right behind me.”

OceanofPDF.com

59 · Lev

It's the fading edge of dusk when Lev and Miracolina arrive on the road that skirts the northern edge of the Graveyard. They're on foot now. An old rusted road sign points ahead toward what was once Davis Air Force Base. The faint shape of aircraft can be seen rising in the desert more than a mile beyond the fence.

"An air force base? Your friend is holing up in an air force base?"

"It's not a base anymore," Lev tells her, "and hasn't been since the war. It's an aircraft salvage yard."

"So the Akron AWOL is hiding in one of those planes?"

"Not just him, and not just one plane."

The fence seems to go on forever. Every few minutes a car zooms past on its way to or away from Tucson. Lev knows that drivers must see them and wonder what two kids are doing way out here, but he doesn't care. He's too close to waste time hiding from headlights now.

"I know the gate's up here somewhere. It's guarded, but they'll recognize me and let us in."

"You sure about that? Not everyone in the world is like your worshipful tithes."

At last the gate comes into view, and Lev picks up the pace.

"Slow down!" Miracolina yells.

"Catch up!" Lev yells right back.

As he nears the gate, he sees one of the kids on guard duty hurrying to greet him. There's something in the kid's hands, but it's gotten too dark to see just what it is until it's too late, and a single rifle shot explodes through the dying dusk.

OceanofPDF.com

60 · Starkey

From the moment the cuffs are on Starkey's wrists, he begins his escape act. He has no secret key, no penknife in his shoe to pick the lock, but a true master knows how to improvise.

He keeps his wits about him as they bring him to Connor's jet, suppressing his fury at the humiliation of being collared in front of the entire Graveyard. The arrogance of Connor! Allowing him to "preserve his dignity" was anything but dignified. Starkey would rather have fought as they dragged him through the dirt. *That* would be dignified —but to treat him with such limp pity? It was the ultimate insult.

The two kids assigned to guard him are bigger than him and are armed. Once inside the jet, they relock the handcuffs around a steel support strut so he stays in one place. Satisfied, the two kids leave, one of them dangling the key in front of him to taunt him, before shoving it in his pocket. They close the door, and Starkey finds himself an official prisoner of war.

He watches the two guards from the window of the jet, sizing them up. They're chatty with each other—probably friends. Of course, neither of them are storks; Connor made sure of that. Storks are now the enemy. Well, if Starkey has his way, Connor will see what a formidable enemy they are.

This, Starkey knows, is the turning point of his life. Not his escape from the Juvies, not his arrival at the Graveyard, but this moment alone, handcuffed in a plane. Everything depends on getting out of this jet, and no mistakes can be made. If he's going to lead the storks to greatness, he's going to have to dazzle everyone with his escape.

Starkey squats, getting his feet on the chain between the cuffs. He knows they're tempered steel. Not even bolt cutters would separate them. As for the support strut, it's part of the plane's airframe and can't be torn loose. The weakest link here is flesh and bone.

Starkey takes a few deep breaths to steady himself. Every escape artist is someday faced with an impossible escape; however, the true

artist knows that nothing is impossible if you're willing to do the unthinkable.

Getting himself leverage and locking his jaw to keep from shouting out, Starkey brings the heel of his boot down on his left hand. The pain is excruciating, but he swallows his scream. He brings it down again, this time feeling the fine bones of his hand begin to break. The pain makes him weak. His body resists, but his will countermands that biological order, and he brings his heel down again.

Quickly, before blood flows into the area, making it swell, he shifts the cuff slightly and brings his heel down on his wrist. The bones of his wrist shatter on the metal of the cuff. He feels his vision begin to go as dark as if he's been tranq'd, but he forces away the cloudiness and nausea, breathing slowly, deeply, forcing himself to stay conscious and transforming the pain into action. He's bit his tongue; blood fills his mouth, but he spits it out. The job is done. With his right hand, he twists his left cuff. This time he's unable to hold back the wail of pain as he forces his shattered left hand through the small hole.

OceanofPDF.com

61 · Noah

Being assigned to guard a guy who's handcuffed and closed inside a jet isn't exactly a difficult job, but hey—if Connor feels Starkey needs two guards, who is Noah Falkowski to argue? This is the first assignment given to Noah directly by Connor since he was rescued from his unwinding nearly four months ago, and he's not gonna screw it up. Inside the jet, Starkey lets out a guttural scream.

"What the hell?" asks the other kid who's guarding Starkey.

"That is one pissed-off dude," says Noah.

Right about then a Jeep comes speeding toward them, its headlights making the twilight seem darker around them.

"What the hell?" says the other kid. Clearly his favorite expression.

The Jeep screeches to a halt, and out steps Trace. He heads straight for Connor's jet.

"Whoa, Trace, hold up. Connor's not in there," Noah says.

"Where is he?"

Noah's not quite sure. All he knows is that Connor has called the remaining members of the Holy of Whollies for a meeting after the Starkey incident. "He left the main aisle. One of the supply jets, maybe?"

"You're useless." Trace hops back into his Jeep and speeds toward the outlying planes. Only once he's gone does Noah hear a banging sound from inside Connor's jet—but it's not the kind of sound he'd expect Starkey to make. The emergency exit above the wing begins to open.

"What the hell? How did he get loose?"

"Shh!" Noah cocks his pistol. He's never fired it and knows it's just a tranq, but it will do the job. He never really liked Starkey and won't mind being the one to tranq him as he tries to escape from the jet. The emergency door falls inward. Both kids hold their weapons at the ready, but Starkey doesn't come out. Cautiously they get closer, and when Noah looks inside, he sees straight through the plane to the

darkening desert on the other side. While they were staring at this emergency exit, Starkey had climbed through the other one on the opposite side of the plane and is gone.

"Aw crap!"

Noah is less worried about Starkey than he is about having to tell Connor he screwed up his first real assignment.

OceanofPDF.com

62 · Starkey

He wears a hooded coat pulled from Connor's closet to hide his face. His left hand feels like a twenty-pound weight on the end of his wrist. With every heartbeat it pounds so painfully that his knees wobble, but somehow he keeps himself moving. He knows that Trace is back, and that's a game changer. Connor doesn't know yet, which means Starkey can use Trace's return to his advantage.

The Graveyard is scrambling. Kids race every which way. An aisle over, there's a crowd at the arsenal. Hayden hands out weapons; not just one or two, but everything. No one notices Starkey.

A Stork Club member passes, carrying a load of weapons, and Starkey grabs him with his good hand. When the kid sees who it is, he almost shouts out his name, but Starkey stops him.

"Shut up and listen. Get a message out to the Storks. On my signal, we storm the escape jet."

"But . . . that's not the plan."

"It's *my* plan, do you understand?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, Starkey." Then he looks at Starkey's hand, like he might ask a question about it, but decides not to. "What's the signal?"

Starkey looks at the kid's load of weapons and pulls out a flare gun. "This," he says. "Go now!"

The kid races off to spread the word.

Starkey can see Trace's Jeep speeding back toward the main aisle from the supply jets, having been given bad information from the idiots guarding him. Starkey's not sure where Connor is—perhaps the ComBom, which will probably be the next place Trace will check.

Then Starkey spots Ashley racing from the arsenal with a nasty-looking machine gun, and he intercepts her. Her eyes go wide when she sees him.

"What the hell are you doing out? Does Connor know?"

"He will if you don't keep your voice down!"

Ashley moves closer to him. “Forget it, Starkey. Why don’t you just make a run for it? Connor won’t care, as long as you’re out of his way when the Juvies come.”

“Are you a stork, Ashley, or are you one of Connor’s lackeys after all?”

When it’s put that way, there’s really only one response that Starkey’s key “sleeper agent” could give.

“What do you want me to do?”

OceanofPDF.com

63 · Trace

Unable to find Connor, Trace speeds back to the main aisle, headed for the ComBom, ready to sound the alarm himself. He sees kids carrying weapons away from the arsenal, but they're not moving nearly fast enough.

He's so distracted, he nearly runs down Ashley, who's standing right in his path. He screeches to a halt.

"Trace! There you are!"

"Where's Connor? The Juvies are coming with a full takedown force."

"We know, Hayden heard the chatter," Ashley tells him. "Connor wants you to power up the escape jet."

"He knows I'm back?"

"Of course—he saw you racing off to the supply jets in a panic."

"It wasn't panic," Trace says, although he knows it was. "I'll get the Dreamliner ready for flight. If we're fast enough, we may not need to fight them. Tell Connor to start loading kids onto the plane."

"Sure thing, Trace." But she does no such thing. She watches Trace race to the Dreamliner and climb up the stairs. Then she goes to tell Starkey that her mission has been accomplished.

OceanofPDF.com

64 · Lev

The rifle shot explodes through the Graveyard gate, ringing in Lev's ears. "Down!" he yells. "They're shooting at us!"

But Miracolina is already down. Not just down, but crumpled. She lies lifelessly in the dirt by the side of the road.

"No!" He falls to his knees beside her, afraid to look, afraid to touch her. "Please, God! No!" This can't be happening. Not again! Everyone Lev gets close to is either killed or maimed, and it can't happen again! He prays for the impossible. He prays for it not to be true. . . .

Then he rolls Miracolina over to find there's no gaping hole in her chest. But there is a small spot of blood on her shoulder. And the tiny flag of a tranq bullet. He doesn't know whether to be relieved or horrified.

"Looks like you've got trouble from both sides, Lev," says Nelson, somewhere in the dark behind him. "What to do . . . what to do?"

Then, from the gate, he hears a shaky voice say, "Stay away, whoever you are, or I'll shoot again!"

But before the teen guard can even aim his rifle, Nelson fires a second tranq bullet out of the darkness and takes the guard down right through the fence.

"Enough of him," Nelson says calmly. "Now, where were we?"

Lev still can't see Nelson, but Nelson can clearly see him, because Lev hears the telltale *pffft* of a tranq being fired. It hits his pant leg, deflecting off a rivet in his jeans, and lands in the gravel beside him. Lev knows he has no defense against Nelson now, so thinking quickly, he grabs the dart, digs it into the fabric of his jeans, careful not to nick his skin, and collapses on top of Miracolina. He closes his eyes. He hears the second guard panicking by the fence, and hears Nelson's footsteps approaching from the other direction on the gravel. Lev's heart races like it might explode in his chest, but he holds still, playing possum for his life, and prays for a second miracle in as many minutes. He prays that Nelson will fall for his act.

OceanofPDF.com

65 · Nelson

He never went to Indian Echo Caverns. Nelson merely drove his van to a roadside café a few miles away, then monitored his laptop and waited for the tracking nanites in Lev and Miracolina's blood to show movement away from the cabin. Then he followed. It was no accident that the bed frames were nearly rusted all the way through. Nelson had wanted them to escape. For a while he worried that Lev might be too stupid to figure out how to break free, but in the end the boy rose to the occasion.

Lev didn't give away the location of Connor Lassiter that day, but Nelson heard enough to know that they were on their way to warn him about the big bad parts pirate. All Nelson had to do was give them a leash and let them lead the way.

Now that he knows Lassiter is at the defunct air force base, he has no use for these two anymore, but killing them would require too much disposal time. Besides, knowing Lev will wake up and have to live with the knowledge that he was responsible for Connor being unwound on the black market is a far sweeter revenge than the numb silence of death.

Nelson is not seriously concerned about the skittish AWOL still manning the gate. The first one fired wild, and he's confident the second doesn't really know how to wield a rifle with live ammo either. Most likely they were trained on tranq bullets, which have no kick and shoot lower. Nelson, who can use both, is well armed for this mission. In fact, he has a romantic notion that, for this capture, he will be like an old-fashioned gunslinger—his singular purpose reflected in a tour de force of firepower. He has three pistols at the ready and a semiautomatic rifle slung across his back. All but one pistol are loaded with fast-acting tranqs, which are far more effective than bullets. A bullet can graze a target, hit a limb—even inflict a body shot, and still the target can return fire. With a tranq, no matter where it hits, it

takes a target out of the equation instantly. As for the live-ammo pistol, well, Nelson considers that his insurance policy.

He's about to check Lev to make sure he made an accurate and effective hit, when the situation takes a drastic turn that no gunslinger could have predicted.

OceanofPDF.com

66 · Gate Guard

The one remaining kid at the gate has no idea what has taken his comrade down. Their job usually consists of giving directions to people who are lost, because no one comes to the Graveyard intentionally at night. Trace has put the fear of God into both of them, however, and now his friend is lying on the ground right in front of the gate, possibly dead.

He hurries to him, fully expecting to be killed on the way. Although he heard voices outside the gate, they're silent now. No one shoots at him. And he's relieved to find his friend still breathing.

The only warning he has is the sudden rev of an approaching engine. Then out of nowhere, a police battering ram, its headlights dark, crashes through with such speed that the gates fly off their hinges. He dives out of the way just in time, and when he looks back, he sees his unconscious friend turned to roadkill by the wheels of the battering ram. Flowing in behind the ram is a flood of Juvey squad cars and armored riot trucks, followed by the chilling sight of Unwind transport trucks—it's just as Trace said. This is a full takedown force!

Only now that they've crashed the gate do their headlights come on, illuminating the desert before them, glinting off the planes in the distance. After the last transport truck passes through the gate, a brown van barrels through, following the Juvies, and then some kid races through the ruined gate, running after the van.

What comes next? thinks the gate guard. *An elephant?*

When the running kid realizes there's no way he's going to catch up with the party crashers on foot, he spots the guard and runs toward him. The guard reflexively raises his rifle but realizes that like an idiot, he's holding it upside down. By the time he rights it, the kid is there, ripping it away from him.

"Don't be stupid, I'm not the enemy," he says. There's something familiar about his face. Like maybe he's seen him before, but with shorter hair. "You have a Jeep or something?"

“Behind the trailer . . .”

“Good. Give me the keys.”

And this younger kid’s voice is so commanding, the guard obeys, reaching into his pocket and handing him the keys.

“Listen to me,” the kid says. “There’s a girl outside the gate. She’s been tranq’d. I want you to get her and run. Take her someplace safe. Do you understand?”

The guard nods “Yeah, sure. Someplace safe.”

“Promise me you’ll do that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I promise.”

Satisfied, the kid gets into the Jeep and drives off toward the main aisle, where gunfire can already be heard. Clearly he doesn’t know how to drive, but that really doesn’t matter much when there’s no road, only hardpan desert.

Once he’s gone, the guard takes a moment to look at the remains of his fallen comrade, then bolts. Somewhere in the bushes just outside the gate is a tranq’d girl. He doesn’t care. Every man for himself in a Juvey crackdown. Every girl, too. So rather than even looking for her, he takes off running as fast as he can, and leaves the girl to the Juvies, or the coyotes—whichever come first.

OceanofPDF.com

67 · Connor

With his volunteer defense force fully armed—about sixty kids in all—Connor dispatches half of them to hide behind Rip, the largest boys' dormitory. It's a C-130 cargo plane with its wings ripped off and a belly slung so low to the ground that a small militia can hide behind it. "You're the left defense flank," he tells them. "Do what you can to draw the Juvies' fire and keep them in the north end of the main aisle."

"Maybe we'll get lucky for once," one kid says. "Maybe the Juvies won't come after all."

Connor tries to offer him a reassuring smile. He doesn't know the boy's name. He tried his best to learn as many names as he could, but there was only so much he could do. If this kid gets killed, or worse, unwound, who will remember him? Who will remember any of them? He wishes he could have been wise enough to have had each kid carve his or her name into the steel of the old Air Force One, as a testament to the fact that they existed. Even if no would ever see it, at least it would be there. But now it's too late.

Connor takes the rest of his fighting force to the Rec Jet, directly across the main aisle from Rip. "We'll set up a barricade beneath the wings," he tells them, "and shoot out from behind it."

"Where will you be?" a girl asks.

"Right beside you, Casey," Connor tells her, happy to have remembered her name.

"No," says another kid. "The king should never be on the front lines. In chess, I mean."

"This isn't chess," Connor points out. "It's our lives."

"Yeah," he says, "but I kinda like to picture myself as a knight."

"Well, you got the horse face," says Casey, and everyone laughs. That they can laugh in the face of this says more about their courage than anything else.

Connor and his left flank fighters race to push couches, tables, and arcade machines into a barricade. Then, while Connor's upending a pool table, Hayden's voice blares in his earpiece.

"Connor, something's wrong. I can't raise the guards at the gate—no one's responding."

"It can't be! We're not ready!"

Then the horse-faced kid says, "We'll never be ready. So I guess that means we're as ready as we'll ever be."

Connor climbs to the hatch of the Rec Jet and looks north across the dark desert to see a wall of approaching headlights fanning out . . . getting wider. "Sound the alarm," he tells Hayden. "Here we go."

OceanofPDF.com

68 · Vessels

To look at an airplane head on, one might get the uncanny feeling that it has eyes. No doubt the planes of the Graveyard have witnessed many things, and perhaps they are the only ones with a clear perspective of fight and folly on the day the Juvenile Authority invades.

GymBo, the northernmost jet on the main aisle, has the best view of the approaching Juvey force. Its fuselage resonates with the monotone blare of the general alarm. On the ground around it, kids who had been trying to save what they can from the salvage yard drop what they're doing and run south, as they've been told. What was an organized chaos now becomes full-fledged panic around the stalwart rows of retired aircraft.

The medical jet has a clear view of the Dreamliner and its engines, which are powering up, preparing for flight. If Connor could see what the medical jet sees, he might alter his plan and call for everyone to get onboard before the Juvies arrive, but he has no idea that the escape jet is back in play.

The Dreamliner has an unobstructed view of Starkey, who is no longer bothering to hide his face as he prepares to signal the storks to abandon Connor's plan and follow his. But Trace in the cockpit is too involved in prepping the plane to share the jet's vision.

Toward the south end of the main aisle, Hush Puppy, the stealth bomber, watches as panicking Whollies running beneath its wings and belly stop as they hear the Dreamliner's engines begin to power up. "What's this?" they cry. "Are we flying out of here after all?" And rather than running south they hesitate, unsure of what to do.

And Dolores, the Korean War bomber, stares blankly at Connor, unable to tell him how badly he's about to be blindsided by mutiny. Although he's in radio contact with Hayden in the ComBom, who monitors videocams all around the Graveyard, none of those cameras can see what the planes already know—that this graveyard of gutted, dismantled aircraft is about to become a human graveyard as well.

• • •

The Juvey squad cars part left and right as they approach the main aisle, revealing behind them four armored riot trucks, black and angular like diesel engines. They stop at the head of the main aisle, and out of them flood dozens of armed officers in ballistic riot gear.

In the ComBom, Hayden flips from one surveillance camera to another, hoping that a new view might make the situation look less dire.

"Connor, are you seeing this?" he says into his headpiece. "It's not just Juvies—they've brought a freaking SWAT team!"

"I can see that. The squad cars are breaking off. Where are they going?"

"Hold on." Hayden flips to a different camera. "The aisles on either side of you. They're trying to surround us."

Connor orders a handful of kids from both the left and right flank to intercept the squad cars before they can get past, but keeps the larger part of his force hiding, waiting to ambush the riot team as soon as they're far enough down the main aisle. "We don't have to beat them," Connor reminds everyone. "We just have to keep them fighting us, instead of going after the others."

Just then a panicked kid runs out of the shadows into the main aisle in a frenzy to escape. A riot cop raises a gun and tranqs him, and as he drops to the dust, Connor gives the order to attack.

The riot squad is hit from both sides by everything Connor's team has. They take cover and return fire.

Meanwhile, on the side aisles, the kids Connor sent to take out the Juvey squad cars fire round after round, blowing out tires and shattering the windshields. One car careens into the forward landing gear of an old fighter jet and bursts into flames.

"Yes!" Hayden shouts. "No squad car has gotten past the third plane in the aisle, on either side," he tells Connor. "They're scrambling out of their cars, firing into the dark. Connor? Connor, are you there?"

Connor's there, but his brain won't give rise to words. Beside him Casey lies draped over the leg of the upended pool table with a tranq

bullet in her neck—but worse than that is the horse-faced boy. He took a real bullet to the forehead.

"My God!" screams one of the others. "They're not just tranqing us, they're killing us too!"

And this kid's panic—Connor's *own* panic—is the reason why. Sure, the Juvenile Authority wants to save them for unwinding—but a bullet through the brain of the kid next to you is enough to make anyone panic and run. So Connor digs down into his own fortitude and finds courage enough to stand his ground, and following his example, so do the others.

• • •

Starkey, at the foot of the Dreamliner's forward staircase, jabs himself with a morphine hypodermic brought to him by a medic who also happens to be a stork. In seconds he begins to feel dizzy and distant, but he fights the wooziness. He climbs the stairs and waits at the jet's open door. His hand is already numbing from the morphine, and although the powerful painkiller wants to put him to sleep, his own adrenaline rush fights back. What remains is a calm in the midst of the chaos that is almost transcendent. He is untouchable. He raises the flare gun and fires, lighting the sky in shimmering pink. The storks, who had been hiding rather than running south, all come out and surge toward the Dreamliner, streaming up the two sets of stairs.

• • •

Farther south, kids who have reached the fringe planes of the Graveyard see the wave of Whollies flooding toward the escape jet.

"Hey, there's someone in there! Someone's flying it! Come on!" They double back, heading toward the Dreamliner instead of running south, and as more escaping kids see others do an about-face, mob mentality takes over. They all run toward the waiting jet.

• • •

On the battlefront, Connor's force is outnumbered and outclassed by the weapon skills of the riot team. But this was expected. This is all part of the plan. About a third of Connor's team is down on both flanks. He doesn't want to know who's been tranq'd and who's been killed.

"You're clear for phase two," Hayden tells him, and Connor prepares to order the right flank to abandon their position and race toward the fuel tankers, drawing the invaders' attention away from the kids breaking south.

"No . . . no, wait," Hayden tells him. "Something's wrong!"

Suddenly the riot squad is no longer interested in Connor and his defense force. They're pushing forward, racing down the main aisle—and only now, with the bursts of deafening crossfire gone, does Connor hear the whine of jet engines. He turns to see kids rushing the escape jet.

"No! What are they doing?"

Then Connor sees him. Starkey. He stands atop the forward staircase, shepherding in his flock of storks—but it's not just storks who are trying to get on. Now a massive push of kids crowds the base of both staircases in a panic. It's perhaps the entire population of the Graveyard, fighting one another to get onto those narrow stairs.

Even before the riot police get down to them, Juvies come in on either side and start taking kids down with tranqs, like a shooting gallery. Connor can do nothing but watch as his plan—and all hope—crumbles into desert dust.

• • •

For once storks come first. For once storks will be victorious. And to hell with everyone else. The bio-raised world never did anything for Starkey. Well, now it will. Those bio-raised kids will be targets and draw the fire of the Juvies while his storks get onboard.

The exodus doesn't move as quickly or as smoothly as he wants it to, but at least it's moving. The riot police are still a ways off, but the Juvey-cops themselves have taken up positions much closer and have

begun taking out the swarms of kids fighting to get on the stairs. Most of his storks, however, are already onboard.

Then a Juvey targets one of the kids on the stairs. He's tranq'd and goes down, slowing the storks behind him. They trample over him, and he seems to vanish beneath everyone's feet.

Ashley, the secret weapon stork, is the last stork up the stairs. She smiles at Starkey.

"Made it!" she says, reaching for him to help her up the last few steps.

But just then one of the Juvies on the ground locks eyes with Starkey and takes aim at him. Thinking quickly, he smoothly pulls Ashley over just a bit. The tranq bullet embeds in her back instead of his chest. She locks eyes with him in shock.

"Sorry, Ashley."

And before she can slump unconscious in his arms, he strategically pushes her back down the stairs, causing a domino-tumble of kids behind her. It gives Starkey just enough time to close the door.

The kids inside are both excited and terrified. Seeing that the front hatch is closed, they close the rear hatch as well. With the seats removed from the plane, no one quite knows what to do. Some kids sit, some stand, some look out of windows.

Starkey goes straight to the cockpit, where he finds Trace, focused and single-minded.

"Is everyone aboard?" Trace asks.

"Yeah, yeah, everyone's here," Starkey says. "Go!"

Only now does he realize Starkey's in charge. "You? Where's Connor?"

"He didn't make it, now let's get out of here."

Instead Trace stands up, looks out the window, and sees the panic outside. Kids still flood the stairs even though the doors are closed, and a quick glance into the cabin makes it clear exactly which kids were saved and which weren't.

"You son of a bitch!"

This is no time for arguments. Starkey pulls out a gun but keeps his distance so that Trace can't use one of his fancy boeuf disarming

maneuvers. "You'd save Connor's kids, but you won't save storks, is that it? Fly this plane or I shoot."

"Kill me and no one gets out of here."

But Starkey doesn't lower his weapon because he's not bluffing, and Trace knows it.

Trace's glare could melt iron. He sits back down and eases the throttle forward. "When we land," Trace says, "I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

Starkey's pretty sure he's not bluffing either.

• • •

The Dreamliner pulls forward, knocking over both sets of metal stairs. Kids and cops scramble to get out from under the huge plane's wheels as it picks up speed, taxiing at nearly thirty miles per hour. Connor had positioned it with a clear path to the runway, and the Juvies try unsuccessfully to head it off.

On the ground, the stranded kids try to break away and go back to the old plan of running south, but now they're surrounded. Juvies and riot police tranq them. They don't even have to aim; just shoot into the crowd and someone goes down.

• • •

Connor watches in horror as it all goes wrong. A Juvey fires at him, and Connor deflects the tranq bullet with his rifle. Before the man can fire again, Connor charges him, taking him down with a single swing from the butt of his rifle. When Connor looks up, he sees the stork-filled Dreamliner begin to accelerate down the runway—but he quickly sees that there's a problem.

Far, far away, barely visible in the night, is a dark, rectangular shape on the runway. It's nearly a mile away, but as the plane picks up speed and closes the distance, its headlights illuminate an armored riot truck that has pulled right into the plane's path, playing chicken with a 112-ton jet.

In the cockpit Trace sees it, but it's too late to abort liftoff.

In the truck, the driver realizes a moment too late that this is a game he's going to lose.

As the jet's nose lifts off the ground, the truck swerves to get out of the way, but the driver isn't fast enough. The starboard landing gear clips the truck, sending it tumbling like a toy, and a huge chunk of the landing gear rips loose, just as the plane leaves the ground. The Dreamliner lists precariously to one side, threatening to fall from the sky, but then stabilizes. Its broken landing gear, twisted and useless, retracts sluggishly into the wheel well.

On the ground, hundreds of earthbound kids are "tranq'd and yanked" by the Juvies, finding neither salvation nor sanctuary in the flightless vessels around them, while up above, the only vessel ever to be resurrected from the Graveyard carries 169 souls into the sky: 169 souls with no possible way to land.

OceanofPDF.com

69 · Lev

Lev has the advantage of being behind the action. He can see where the battlefront is, he can see the tactics of the Juvey attack force, and since no one has yet to graft eyes in the back of their head, Lev can move behind the battle without being caught.

And so can Nelson.

It's before the escape jet has taxied away, when the focus is still on the armed AWOLs toward the north end of the main aisle. Lev spots Nelson leaving his van at the far western aisles of the Graveyard and moving in on foot. The parts pirate now wears a Juvey uniform he must have pulled from a real Juvey that he tranq'd. He'll blend in. He'll pass for one of them. The only thing Lev can pass for is an AWOL, and that won't get him anything but unconscious. He knows he has to be careful.

Lev tries to figure out where Connor might be in this war zone, and suddenly he realizes that he doesn't even know this Connor. The old Connor was all about saving himself, and he was good at it. But will he still be that way now that he's responsible for every kid here? Connor saved a baby once. He also saved Lev. No, he won't be running or hiding. He'll be here until the last AWOL is taken down, and that last one may very well be him.

Nelson doesn't know that. He sees Connor in only one dimension: a lowly AWOL. He won't look for Connor at the battlefront, he'll look for him on the fringes—and sure enough, Lev sees Nelson on the edges; places where stray kids have been tranq'd. Like a vulture pecking at carrion, Nelson lifts their heads off the ground, looks at each of their faces, then drops them back down again, moving on to the next one.

Lev circles behind Nelson in shadows, giving him a wide berth, and makes his way closer to the danger zone, where riot police clash with armed AWOLs. This is where Connor will be—but how can Lev save him from both Nelson *and* the Juvies?

When the answer comes to Lev, he grins in spite of the dire battle around him. The answer is simple. It's terrifying. It's impossible. It might work!

• • •

Lev nears the main aisle just as the Dreamliner begins to move and riot police advance on the crush of kids who never made it onboard.

A hundred yards away, on the failed front line, Lev sees a figure in off-color camouflage fearlessly charge a Juvey shooting at him. The kid takes the Juvey out—not with a bullet, but with the butt of his rifle—and there's something about the way this kid moves that's familiar.

Lev charges against a panic of escaping kids running toward him, ignoring the sound of gunfire, the roar of jet engines, and the crunch of crushing metal as the Dreamliner takes out a riot truck on takeoff.

The tumbling truck bursts into flames as the plane rises into the sky, and the light of the explosion illuminates the face of the kid in camouflage. Lev knows he's found him.

"Connor!"

But Connor's eyes are fixed on the escaping plane. "Don't just stand there, run!" Connor tells him. "You were all supposed to run!"

"Connor, it's me. It's Lev."

Even when Connor looks at Lev, he doesn't seem to recognize him at first, and Lev knows it's more than just the hair. Neither of them are the kids they were a year ago.

"Lev? What are you doing here? What, has the whole world gone nuts, and I've lost my mind?"

"I'm sure both are true, but I'm really here." Lev bends down and takes the tranq gun away from the cop Connor has just rendered unconscious. "I came to save you."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"That's probably true too, but I have to warn you: There's a parts pirate after you."

"That's the least of my problems right now!"

Another kid with an automatic rifle hurries up to Connor. "We're out of ammunition! What do we do?"

“Sticks and stones and airplane parts,” Connor tells him. “Or you can take your chances and run. Starkey didn’t leave us many choices.”

“Freakin’ Starkey!” The kid drops his spent weapon. “Good luck, Connor,” he says, and hurries away, trying to lose himself in the night.

Farther away, the mob that has been trying to get on the Dreamliner is now lit by the spotlight of a police helicopter and is fully surrounded. There are maybe four hundred kids corralled and helpless, while huge transport trucks roll down the main aisle to gather them and take them away.

“There’s nothing you can do for them now,” Lev tells Connor.

“I won’t leave them.”

“That’s why I’m not giving you a choice.” Then Lev raises the tranq pistol he took from the unconscious Juvey and shoots Connor in the arm.

Connor’s spun away by the force of the blast and goes down, the tranqs taking effect in seconds. Lev catches him as he falls, and he looks up at Lev with half-open, fading eyes.

“It didn’t work, Lev,” he says weakly. “My plan didn’t work.”

“I know,” Lev tells him as Connor slips from consciousness, “but maybe mine will.”

OceanofPDF.com

70 · Nelson

He has no idea how many kids are here, how deep the airplane graveyard goes, or where his target might be in the midst of the chaos. No matter. If the Juvies do their job, and it looks like they will, the whole nest of AWOLs will be rounded up, tranq'd, and yanked. Lassiter will be among them. Nelson just needs to keep his eyes open and his head low, because some of these kids have weapons, and by the sound of them, they're deadly.

Methodically he checks the AWOLs who have already been tranq'd and takes down a few himself, just so he really looks like a Juvey-cop doing his job. He keeps a safe distance from the heart of the battle, knowing that the Akron AWOL will do the same.

One of the Juvey-cops spots him looking at the faces of the fallen AWOLs. "Don't waste your time," he says. "It's our asses if any of these kids get past us and into the desert."

"I'm looking for an AWOL neighbor kid," Nelson tells him without missing a beat. "Favor for the wife."

But the cop is suspicious. "Do I know you? What unit are you with?"

"Unit Sixteen, down from Phoenix."

"There *is* no Unit Sixteen in Phoenix."

Deciding this has gone quite far enough, Nelson tranqs him, then tranqs an escaping AWOL who saw him do it. Then gets back to the task of finding the Akron AWOL.

It's only when he sees the Dreamliner taking off that he begins to worry. What are the chances that Lassiter's on that plane? Then he realizes that the riot squad isn't just tranq'ing and yanking—they're going against procedure, loading the mob into the transport trucks conscious. If Lassiter gets loaded into a truck before Nelson can get to him, it's over.

Now he's worried. He moves closer to the riot roundup, pulling out binoculars, scanning the faces. A gaggle of scared teenagers. No

Lassiter. Sure, he might be in the swarm, but if he is, Nelson can't spot him. He puts down the binoculars.

"Crap!"

He knows that with every passing second his chances get slimmer. Around him, kids who were either too slow to get there or smart enough to stay away from the corralled mob race in all directions to escape. Some get tranq'd as they run, but the farther they are away from the main action, the better their chances.

Up ahead Nelson sees the dark silhouette of one smaller kid struggling to carry an older tranq'd kid on his back—reminding Nelson of the way ants will carry off their wounded. But apparently this kid has better sense than an ant, because he gives up, drops the bigger kid in the dust, and takes off into the shadows.

Nelson almost doesn't check the dropped kid. He almost walks on past, because he doesn't want to miss a single face running by, but Nelson is nothing if not thorough. He grabs the unconscious the kid by the hair, lifts his head out of the dirt, and practically yells with triumphant surprise. It's him! It's Lassiter! Brought to him like a gift, right in his path!

Nelson wastes no time. He hefts him onto his back, gets his bearings, and weaves through the aircraft, heading toward his waiting van. As he crosses an outer aisle, he's spotted by another Juvey.

"Forget him," the cop says. "Leave him for Sanitation and Transport. Our orders are to take out the bolters." And to emphasize his point, he fires at a girl bolting between two fighter jets, tranqing her into the dust.

"Special orders on this one," Nelson tells him, trying to get past, but the other cop won't yield.

"Why? Is he the one who's been starting the fires in town?"

"Yeah," Nelson says. "He's the one."

Then behind them, three kids try to break for the outer aisles, and their attempted escape pulls the cop's attention long enough for Nelson to get past him.

The farther from the main aisle, the fewer AWOLs, and the fewer cops. Transport trucks are already here on the outskirts, gathering whatever tranq'd kids they find before moving into the high-density

zone. The San & Tran workers treat the fallen kids with much more care than the Juvies, zipping them into padded transport bags—constrictive sleeping bags in either powder blue or pink that cover everything but their faces, so that their precious parts are protected in transit.

Nelson reaches his van, dumps Connor in the back, and drives out the way he came, heading toward the north gate, knowing he's not in the clear yet.

As he nears the gate, there's a small showing of Juvey squad cars—as if any of the AWOLs will be stupid enough to try to get out through the main gate. They stop Nelson, and he flashes a stolen badge. "Orders to take this van to HQ. It's being impounded as evidence."

"What, are you kidding me? The whole damn place is being impounded as evidence! They couldn't wait for a tow truck?"

"When can they wait for anything?"

The cop shakes his head. "Incredible!" And he waves Nelson through.

As Nelson leaves the Graveyard behind, he turns on the radio, surfs until he finds a song he knows, and sings with rare joy.

Divan, his black market dealer, will pay a fortune—and the dollar signs Nelson now sees will soon be seen through the Akron AWOL's eyes. That's the real reward, far more important than the cash. Nelson doesn't even remember what this kid's eyes are like, but it doesn't matter. Whatever their color, whatever their acuity, they'll be the last pair Nelson will ever need. They will be perfect!

He's still thinking of Connor's eyes when he hears the high-pitched blast of a tranq pistol and feels a sudden sharp pain in his leg, then a second, then a third.

His hands, suddenly lead-heavy, fall from the steering wheel, and with his last bit of strength, he forces his head to turn so he can see his attacker.

Rising from behind him in the van is Lev, wearing a smile as big as the desert around them.

"Tranq'd by your own gun," Lev says. "How pathetic."

OceanofPDF.com

71 · Lev

Nelson had used Lev to help him find Connor—and now Lev has returned the favor. With so many Juvies, and so many riot police, getting anyone out of the Graveyard would be a miracle. And then Lev realized that, at least for the moment, Nelson was his greatest ally. Both Nelson and Lev had the same objective: get Connor away from the Juvies and out of the Graveyard alive. So Lev carried an unconscious Connor right into Nelson's path. Lev risked exposing his identity, but with so many kids running, and the only lights from headlights and spotlights, it was easy to keep his face in shadows, then drop Connor and run, letting Nelson do the hard work of getting Connor out.

While Nelson carried Connor off, Lev raced ahead and slipped into his van, keeping low—hoping that Nelson would be distracted by the events around him and euphoric enough at his catch to never notice that Lev was hiding in the backseat.

Now, half a mile from the Graveyard, Nelson slumps in the driver's seat, unconscious, and Lev hurries to take the wheel, keeping the truck from flying off the road. Then, pushing Nelson aside, he stomps on the brakes, and the van comes to a halt.

Only one thing left to do.

Leaving the van, Lev doubles back on foot to the gate. From his position on the floor of the van, he hadn't been able to see how many Juvies were at the gate. Now, as he gets close, he sees there are only a handful—all the rest are in the battle zone. The scant chaparral of the desert doesn't provide enough cover to hide him, but he has to get closer.

He told the kid at the gate to get Miracolina and take her someplace safe. The kid said he would do it, but Lev has to be sure.

There's a squad car right in front of the spot where Miracolina had been, and a Juvey-cop leans against it, talking on his radio. The

moment the Juvey-cop looks away, Lev darts behind the car, keeping low, and checks behind the dry bushes.

She's not there.

He breathes a silent sigh of relief, then turns and hurries back to the van. Once there, he pulls Nelson out and leaves him unconscious in a ditch. Then Lev does his best to drive the van down the narrow two-lane road—which is much different from driving a Jeep off-road, across open desert. *How stupid would it be,* he thinks, *if, after all this, Connor and I both die in a car accident because I don't know how to drive?* He can only thank God that the road is straight.

For once he's batting a thousand, and although he knows he may never see Miracolina again—and that she may, in the end, submit herself for tithing—he knows that he's done everything within his power to save her. To free her.

Be safe, Miracolina, he says to himself, hoping that by saying it, he can make it true, never knowing that the kid at the gate was only interested in saving himself, and that Miracolina was still unconscious just a few feet away from where Lev was searching . . . because he didn't think to look in the backseat of the squad car.

OceanofPDF.com

72 · Starkey

"Well, Starkey, what do we do now?"

"If you ask me one more time, I'll rip your freaking head off."

Bam storms away in frustration.

"At least we got out of there!" Starkey yells after her. "We're probably the only ones who did!"

Although it's not going to mean much if they crash.

Kids sit in groups on the floor of the seatless cabin, some of them crying at the ordeal they've been put through and the friends left behind.

"Suck it up!" he yells at them. "We're storks—we're better than that." Then he holds up his crushed hand, which is now so swollen and purple it barely resembles a hand at all. "Do you see me crying?" This war wound, he realizes, has already become a symbol of his power and a talisman of respect.

The whimpers subside, but not entirely. The truth is, in spite of the morphine swiped from the medical jet, his hand still aches too much to have patience for anything or anybody.

"Where are we going?" someone asks.

"A better place," Starkey says, then realizes that's what they say when you die.

He storms to the cockpit, and storks clear out of his way. Trace sits at the controls with no copilot, and Starkey begins with a threat.

"If you as much as touch that radio . . ."

Trace looks at him, disgusted, then back to the control panel. "Just because you're the one leading these kids, it doesn't mean I want them to be unwound. I haven't, nor will I notify anyone."

"Good. Tell me the plan. Tell me what you schemed up with Connor."

Trace grips the controls to maintain stability as they hit a patch of turbulence. More whimpers from the cabin. Once the turbulence subsides, Trace says, "We'll be over Mexican airspace in a few minutes,

which buys us time, because our military can't pursue without permission, and theirs won't until they see us as a threat. Next we fly within a mile of another jet headed north, switch signatures, and when that other jet hits American airspace, they'll think it's us."

"We can do that?"

Trace doesn't even answer the question. "The plan was to double back into the U.S. and land in an abandoned airfield in the Anza-Borrego Desert, east of San Diego—but there's a problem with the landing gear."

Starkey already knows this. They all felt the collision as the plane smashed the truck in its path. Everyone heard something rip loose. There's no question that there's damage, but it's impossible to know how much. All they have is an idiot-light on the control panel that says LANDING GEAR FAILURE.

"So what do we do about it?"

"We die." Trace lets the thought linger for a moment, then says, "I can try to set us down in a body of water. I'm thinking the Salton Sea."

"In Utah?"

"No, that's the Great Salt Lake, moron. The Salton Sea is a huge dead lake south of Palm Springs. There's a town there that's the asshole of the armpit of the world. You'd fit right in."

Starkey snarls at him, then decides he's not worth it. "How long?"

"I have to find a passing jet and do the signature switch first. Figure an hour and a half till we're there."

"Fine, I'll tell the others." He turns to go, then pauses at the cockpit door, looking back at Trace. "And if you call me moron one more time, I'll blow your brains out."

Trace turns to him and smiles. "Then *you* can land this plane . . . moron."

OceanofPDF.com

73 · Risa

Risa sits in a network studio dressing room, staring at the monitor. The late-night news show on which she and Cam are about to appear has just reported some breaking news: a crackdown on a massive AWOL hideout in Arizona. None other than the airplane graveyard. Kids are already being shipped to harvest camps.

"It is believed that these same AWOL Unwinds are responsible for a rampage of violence in the city of Tucson," says the anchorman. *"The Juvenile Authority hopes this raid will allow the citizens of Tucson to rest easy once more."*

How could this happen? After all the horrific things Risa has done for the past two months to prevent this raid—to keep Connor and Hayden and everyone there safe—the Juvies raided anyway. Maybe it was always going to happen, and Roberta's bargain was a lie from the beginning. How could Risa have been so stupid as to trust anything that woman said?

The assistant stage manager pokes his head in the door. "Three minutes, Miss Ward."

Risa never considered herself a violent girl. Sure, she's always been more than able to defend herself, but she was never the kind of girl to initiate or enjoy brutality. Yet in this moment, she knows she would kill Roberta if she had the means to do it.

Then she realizes she doesn't have to. In less than three minutes Risa will be broadcasting live to a national audience. She doesn't have to kill Roberta. She can unwind her. . . .

• • •

Bright, unnatural light. A TV studio with no audience. A well-known news personality in a suit and tie, looking smaller and older in person than he does on TV. Three cameras—one on him, one on Risa, one on

Cam. As they wait for the show to come back from commercial, News Guy briefs them.

"I'll be asking both of you questions. First about Risa's decision to support unwinding, then about the process of rewinding that ostensibly led to Cam's 'birth,' if you will, and finally I'll ask about your relationship, and how you two found each other. I know they're all questions you've been asked before, but I'm hoping you can give me something fresh."

"Well, we'll certainly do our best," Risa says, with a grin that's a little too pleasant.

Cam leans over to her and whispers, "We should hold hands."

"There's no wide shot," she points out. "No one will see."

"We should anyway."

But this time Cam will not get his way.

The stage manager counts down from five. The red light on camera one comes on.

"Welcome back," says News Guy. "Considering the current police action in Arizona, our guests tonight have a certain . . . resonance, if you will. A militant AWOL turned unwinding advocate, and a young man who, were it not for unwinding, would not even exist. Risa Ward and Camus Comprix."

A moment of pleasant welcomes, and he starts his questioning, as he promised, with Risa, but hits her with something designed to throw her off balance.

"Miss Ward, as a former AWOL yourself, what's your take on the raid in Arizona? Do you support the unwinding of these runaways?"

Nothing he asks can fluster her, because she already knows exactly what she's going to say. Risa turns to look right into camera two, which has just come on.

"I feel it's important that I set the record straight," Risa begins. "I am not now, nor have I ever been, in favor of unwinding. . . ."

OceanofPDF.com

74 · Roberta

Had Roberta been paying attention, things might have gone down differently, meaning they wouldn't have gone down at all. To her credit, her bargain with Risa was an honest, if intensely manipulative one. She made a few calls, pulled a few strings, and was able to confirm with the Juvenile Authority that there were no imminent raids planned on the airplane graveyard. Should that change, Roberta would be given ample warning—which meant ample time to pull further strings to prevent such a raid. Roberta has never been about deceit. She's about results.

However, she has been so wrapped up in the media campaign to make Cam the darling of modern times, she's not aware of the homes set on fire in Tucson, and the brazen youth who set them, claiming to be the avenger of all unwound storks. Yes, the Juvenile Authority was supposed to notify Roberta of the raid through her associates at Proactive Citizenry. But like any spiderlike organization, the fangs of Proactive Citizenry don't know what the spinneret is doing. Once the news hit the airwaves, of course, her phone began to ring her pocket off—but she's been too fed up with too many people wanting too much of her time to answer it.

Thus, Roberta does not know about the raid until the interview with Risa and Cam begins. And by then it's too late.

• • •

Roberta sits in the greenroom, the studio's pleasant little ready room replete with stale danishes and weak coffee, watching a monitor that broadcasts from the studio down the hall. Her expression of horror could curdle the nondairy creamer.

"I am not now, nor have I ever been, in favor of unwinding," Risa says. *"Unwinding may be the single most evil act sanctioned by the human race."*

The newsman, famous for being cool under fire, stammers for a moment. *"But all those public service announcements you made—"*

"They're lies. I was being blackmailed."

Roberta bursts out of the greenroom into the hall and storms toward the studio door. The red light is on. It's supposed to be a warning not to go in, since the cameras are live, but it's a warning she has no intention of heeding.

In the corridor around her are a series of monitors broadcasting Risa's diatribe. Her face is on every screen, looking at Roberta from half a dozen different directions.

"I was threatened and blackmailed by a group called Proactive Citizenry. Oh, they have lots of other names, like the Consortium of Concerned Taxpayers and the National Whole Health Society, but it's all smoke and mirrors."

"Yes, I'm aware of Proactive Citizenry," the newsman says, *"but isn't it a philanthropic group? A charitable organization?"*

"Charitable to whom?"

Just as Roberta nears the stage door, she's intercepted by a security guard.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, you can't go in right now."

"Let me pass, or I promise you, you'll be out of work by morning."

His response is to stand firm and call for backup, so Roberta heads for the control booth instead.

"They claim to control the Juvenile Authority," Risa continues. *"They claim to control a lot of things. Maybe they do, and maybe they don't, but believe me, Proactive Citizenry has no one's interests at heart but its own."*

The shot cuts to Cam, who looks dumbfounded, or just plain dumb; then it goes back to the newsman.

"So your relationship with Camus . . ."

"Is nothing but a publicity stunt," says Risa. *"A publicity stunt carefully planned by Proactive Citizenry to help Cam be accepted and adored."*

Roberta bursts into the control booth, where an engineer works the editing bay, and the show's producer leans back in his chair, extremely pleased. "This is mint," he tells his engineer. "The princess of

unwinding bites the disembodied hand that feeds her! It doesn't get any better than this!"

"Stop the interview!" orders Roberta. "Stop it now, or I will hold you and your network liable for everything she says!"

The producer is unfazed. "Excuse me, who are you?"

"I'm . . . her manager, and she is not authorized to say what she's saying."

"Well, lady, if you don't like what your client has to say, that's not our problem."

"Your viewers need to ask themselves this," Risa says. *"Who stands to benefit most from unwinding? Answer that question, and I think we'll know who's behind Proactive Citizenry."*

Then the security guard comes up behind Roberta and manhandles her out the door.

• • •

Roberta is relegated to the greenroom until the interview is over and they cut to commercial.

The guard, still on "intruder alert" mode, won't let her pass. "I have orders to keep you out of the studio."

"I am going to the restroom!"

She pushes past him and bolts for the studio door. Both Risa and Cam are gone, and the next guests are being miked.

Avoiding the guard—who Roberta knows is fully prepared to tranq her—she turns down a side hallway to the dressing rooms. Risa's dressing room is empty, but Cam is in his. His coat and tie are strewn on the ground like he couldn't wait to peel out of them. He sits before the vanity with his head in his hands.

"Did you hear what she said about me? Did you hear?"

"Where is she?"

"Head in the sand! Turtle in its shell! Leave me alone!"

"Focus, Cam! She was on the stage with you. Where did she go?"

"She ran. She said it was over, that she was history, and she ran down the emergency stairs."

"She *will* be history when I'm through with her."

Roberta takes the emergency stairs down. They're on the second floor, and the only place for Risa to go is out into the parking lot, which is mostly empty at this time of night. She can't have had more than a fifteen-second lead, but she's nowhere to be seen. The only person around is their driver, who leans against his limo, eating a sandwich.

"Did you see her?" Roberta asks.

"See who?" he answers.

And Roberta's phone starts ringing like it will never stop.

OceanofPDF.com

75 · Cam

Roberta returns from her unsuccessful search for Risa. Cam meets her in the greenroom, where two security guards now wait, eager to escort Roberta out. She's on the phone, already in the throes of damage control.

"Antarctica," Cam says. "I should have said something out there, but I froze."

"What's done is done," she says, then growls at a dropped call. "Let's get out of here."

"I'll meet you at the car," Cam tells her. "My stuff's still in the dressing room."

The guards solemnly escort Roberta out of the building, and Cam goes back to the dressing room. He puts on his sports coat and carefully rolls up his tie, putting it in his pocket. Then, when he's sure Roberta has left the building, he says, "It's okay, she's gone."

The closet door opens, and Risa steps out. "Thank you, Cam."

Cam shrugs. "She deserved it." He turns to look at her. She's breathing rapidly, as if she's been running, but he knows she's only been running in her head. "Will they all be unwound? Your AWOL friends?"

"Not right away," she tells him. "But yes, they will be."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." Although she doesn't look at him when she says it, like maybe she thinks it somehow is. Like his very existence makes him guilty.

"I can't help what I am," he tells her.

"I know . . . but today you showed me you can help what you do." And then she leans forward and kisses him on the cheek. He feels it like an electric shock in all the seams of his face. She turns to go, but he can't let her. Not yet. Not without saying—

"I love you, Risa."

She glances back at him and offers nothing more than an apologetic smile. “Good-bye, Cam.”

And she’s gone.

It’s only after she leaves that the anger begins to rise in him. Not just a spike, but an eruption, and there’s nowhere for it to go. He takes the chair and hurls it against the vanity mirror, smashing it. He hurls everything that’s breakable against the walls and doesn’t stop until the security guards burst in on him. It takes three guards to restrain him, but still he’s stronger. He has the best of the best in him—every muscle group, every synaptic reflex. He tears free from the guards, bolts down the emergency exit stairs, and meets Roberta in the limo.

“What took you so long?”

“Solitude,” he says. “I needed some time alone.”

“It’s all right, Cam,” she tells him as they drive away. “We’ll get past this.”

“Yes, I know we will.”

But he keeps his true thoughts to himself. Cam will never accept Risa’s good-bye. He will not let her disappear from his life. He will do whatever it takes to have her, to hold her, to keep her. He has all of Roberta’s resources at his fingertips to get what he wants, and he’s going to use them.

Roberta smiles at him reassuringly between phone calls, and he smiles back. For now Cam will play the game. He’ll be the good rewound boy Roberta wants him to be, but from this moment on, he has a new agenda. He will make Risa’s dream come true and take down Proactive Citizenry piece by bloody piece.

And then she will have no choice but to love him.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Seven

Landings

Our country is challenged at home and abroad . . . it is our will that is being tried and not our strength.

—PRESIDENT JOHNSON on Vietnam and the school campus war protests, 1968

I have every faith that this devastating national conflict shall be resolved, and that the accord between both sides shall also serve as an ultimate solution to the feral teenage problem. But until that glorious day, I am instituting an eight p.m. curfew for anyone under the age of eighteen.

—PRESIDENT MOSS on the Heartland War, two weeks prior to his assassination by militant New Jersey separatists

OceanofPDF.com

76 · Dreamliner

In Southern California, far south of the glitz of Hollywood and far east of the suburban sprawl of San Diego, lies an inland sea as forgotten and as unloved as a state ward AWOL or a harvest camp stork. Hundreds of thousands of years ago it was the northern reach of the Sea of Cortez, before that sea even had a name. But now it's little more than a giant landlocked salt lake, slowly drying into desert. Too saline for vertebrate life, its fish have all died. Their bones cover the shores like gravel.

At ten minutes to midnight, a plane once heralded as the dream of aviation before it was replaced by newer dreams descends toward the Salton Sea. It is flown by a young military pilot with far more confidence than experience. Barely clearing the mountains around the lake, the jet comes in for what airlines ridiculously call "a water landing."

It does not go well.

OceanofPDF.com

77 · Starkey

No seatbelts, no seats. No way to brace themselves for a crash landing. "Lock your elbows together! Hook your legs around each other," Starkey tells them. "We'll be one another's seatbelts."

The storks obey, huddling, locking limbs, turning themselves into a tangled colony of flesh and bone. Sitting on the floorboards, no one can see out the windows to know how close the lake is—but then Trace comes on the intercom. "About twenty seconds," he says. Then the angle of their descent changes as he pulls up the nose of the jet.

"See you on the other side," Starkey says, then realizes once more that it's something you say when you're about to die.

Starkey counts down the last twenty seconds in his head, but nothing happens. Was he counting too fast? Did Trace misjudge? If this is twenty seconds, then they're the longest of his life. Then it finally comes—a jarring jolt, followed by calm.

"Was that it?" someone says. "Is it over?"

There's another jolt, then another and another, each one coming closer together, and Starkey realizes the plane is skimming like a stone. On the fifth skim, a wing dips, acting like a rudder that pivots the plane to a diagonal, and suddenly it's the end of the world. The Dreamliner begins to flip end over end, turning cartwheels against the unforgiving surface of the lake.

Inside, the mob of kids is launched from the floorboards and pulled apart by centrifugal force, thrown in two separate clusters to either end of the main cabin. The hooking of arms actually saves many of them, as they're cushioned by the bodies around them, but those on the outside of the tumbling crush of kids—those acting as the cushions—become the sacrifices. Many of them are killed as they're slammed against the hard surfaces of the Dreamliner.

The cache of weapons, which had been stowed in the overhead compartments, flies free as well, as those compartments tear loose and

burst open. Pistols and rifles and machine guns and grenades become ballistic, creating casualties without ever having to go off.

Wrapped in the forward twist of bodies, Starkey feels his head hit something hard, leaving a gash on his forehead, but that's nothing compared to the exploding pain in his battered hand.

Finally the tumbling jet comes to rest. The cries and wails sound like silence compared to the noise of the crash. Then somewhere toward the back of the cabin there's an explosion: a grenade that lost its pin. It blows a hole in the side of the jet, and water begins to pour in. That's when the electrical system fails, and they're plunged into darkness.

"Over here!" Bam calls. She pulls a huge lever and opens the cabin's front port-side door. A life raft automatically inflates and detaches, then drops to the water, and with a "Sayonara," Bam leaps right out after it.

Starkey's instinct is to get out now . . . but if he's going to be seen as the protector of the storks, then he must be their protector in action, not just words. He waits, shooing kids out the door, making it clear he is not the first one out—but neither does he plan on being the last.

Farther back in the foundering jet, kids pull open wing exits and a midship hatch—but only on the left side. On the right, a slick of jet fuel has ignited in the water and burns beyond the windows.

"The weapons!" Starkey shouts. "Take the weapons! We still have to defend ourselves!" And so kids pick up any and all weapons they can find, throwing them out onto the rafts before jumping out themselves.

The fire outside provides enough light for Starkey to see to the far recesses of the main cabin, and he wishes he hadn't looked. The dead are everywhere. Blood is smeared on every surface, sticky and thick. But there are more living than dead, and more kids running than crawling. Starkey determines right then and there to save only those who can make it out on their own. The critically injured are just liabilities.

The angle of the floor has quickly changed as the jet begins to sink tail-first. The rear cabin is already flooded, and the water level rises in

a steady, relentless surge past the central bulkhead. Then Starkey hears a muffled voice from the front of the jet.

"I need help here!"

Starkey makes his way to the cockpit door and pulls it open. The windshield is shattered, and the entire cockpit is a mess of smashed gauges, open panels, and exposed wires. The pilot's chair has jammed forward, and Trace is pinned.

Which leaves Starkey in an interesting position.

"Starkey!" says Trace, relieved. "I need you to pull me out of here. I can't do it by myself."

"Yes, that's a problem," Starkey says. But is it *his* problem? They needed Trace to get them this far, but they don't need a pilot anymore—and didn't Trace already threaten to kill him? If Trace survives, from this moment on he'll be nothing but a threat—and a dangerous one, at that.

"I never had the guts to try the great water escape," says Starkey. "It killed Houdini, but I'm sure it'll be easy for a big boeuf like you." Then he backs out of the cockpit and closes the door.

"Starkey!" Trace yells. "Starkey, you son of a bitch!"

But Starkey's decision is final, and as he returns to the main hatch, Trace's muffled voice is drowned out by the sounds of panicking storks. There are about a dozen kids left—the slow ones, the injured ones, the ones afraid to jump because they can't swim.

"What's that awful smell?" one of them whines. "What *is* that out there?"

He's right—there's a stench to this lake like a fish tank left to putrify, but it's the least of their problems. Water's already pooling at their feet, and the floor is at a thirty-degree tilt.

Starkey pushes past the lingering kids. "Jump or drown, you've got no other choice, and I'm not waiting for stragglers." Then he hurls himself out the door and into the foul-smelling brine of the Salton Sea.

OceanofPDF.com

78 · Trace

Trace's calls for help go unanswered, and in furious frustration he pounds the console and bucks in the chair, but it doesn't give. He's so tightly wedged in by the accordioned cockpit, not even a boeuf of his strength can get out. He forces himself to calm down and review his options. All he can hear now are the diminishing moans and wails of kids too injured to escape, and of course the relentless rush of water. That's when he realizes there are no options left to him anymore. Starkey made certain of that.

The lake begins to pour in through the broken cockpit window so quickly there's no time to prepare himself. Trace cranes his neck, trying to keep his head above water as long as he can. Then he takes one deep gulp of air, holds it, and he's underwater. Suddenly there's silence all around him except for the metallic complaints of the sinking jet.

His body burns through the last of its oxygen; then, resigned to his fate, Trace releases his final breath. It bubbles away from him in the darkness, and his body gets to the business of drowning. It's as awful as he ever imagined it might be, but he knows it won't last long. Five seconds. Ten. Then the injustice of it all doesn't seem to matter anymore. As the last of his consciousness filters away, Trace holds on to the hope that his choice to fight on the side of the AWOLs instead of the Juvenile Authority will be enough to pay his passage to a truly better place.

OceanofPDF.com

79 · Starkey

The water tastes like rubber and rot and is neither warm nor cold, but tepid, like tea left to steep an hour too long. The last of the plane disappears beneath the surface, leaving nothing but white water bubbling up through the brine and the fuel slick, which has almost burned itself out. Starkey looks around to see kids in the water, kids on rafts, and kids who've drifted too far away to see at all, calling out for help.

There's a deserted shore just a few hundred yards way. Trace, rest his soul, knew enough to bring them down near the unpopulated side of the huge lake. Even so, people will have seen the crash and will come to investigate. They have to get away from the scene as quickly as possible—the attention of the locals is the last thing they need.

"This way!" Starkey tells them, and starts swimming, pulling himself forward with his good hand. The kids in rafts paddle, the kids in the water swim, and in a few minutes they're pulling themselves out of the fetid water onto a spongy shore of pulverized fish bones.

Starkey sets Bam to do a head count, and she comes back with 128. They lost forty-one in the crash. Around him the survivors try to tally exactly who is missing, which just makes Starkey angry. Sitting here will do nothing but get them captured. He knows he's cunning enough to make it on his own; somehow he's got to extend his survival smarts to all of them.

"Everybody up! We can't waste our time licking our wounds and mourning the dead. We've got to get out of here."

"Where do you suggest we go?" asks Bam.

"Right now, anywhere but here."

Starkey knows he needs to give these kids direction and purpose. Now that they're free from the holding pen of the Graveyard, their priorities need to change. Connor might have been happy to just keep kids alive, but Starkey has to make this about more than just survival. Under his leadership, his storks can be a force to be reckoned with.

He goes to the nearest kids nursing their exhaustion and lifts them to their feet by their collars. “Let’s move! We’ll rest when we’re safe.”

“When will we ever be safe?” someone asks. Starkey doesn’t answer, because he knows they’ll probably never be. But that’s all right. They’ve been complacent for too long. Being on the edge will keep them sharp and focused.

As the storks all gather their strength for an uncertain journey on foot, Starkey searches through them until he finds Jeevan, relieved that he’s one of the survivors.

“Jeeves, we’ll need the same type of setup you had in the ComBom, but mobile. I need you to be our eyes and ears and gather all the intelligence you can from the Juvenile Authority.”

Jeevan just shakes his head in panicked disbelief. “That was all high-end military software. We don’t have it anymore. We don’t even have a computer!”

“We’ll commandeer as many computers as you need,” Starkey tells him. “And you’ll make it work.”

Jeevan nods nervously. “Yes, sir.”

Even before they leave the shore, Starkey’s grand plan begins to take shape. He will step up the campaign of vengeance he began in Tucson—only this time it won’t just be a handful of avenging storks, it will be all of them: a guerrilla army 128 strong, heaping punishment on anyone who would unwind a stork. Their numbers will grow with every stork they rescue. He doesn’t doubt that in time they could take down entire harvest camps. And then the Akron AWOL will be nothing but a sorry footnote beneath his own legacy.

Drawing strength from his powerful vision, Starkey leads them into the mountains east of the Salton Sea. His first trick will be to make them all disappear, but that’s only the beginning. From this moment on, there will be no end to the magic.

OceanofPDF.com

80 · Miracolina

Miracolina's head is spinning as she awakes. That's how she knows she's been tranq'd. This is the fourth time she's been tranq'd—she knows the drill by now. Memories of the events leading up to it come back, but slowly and not in order. She suppresses the nausea and sets to the task of determining her current circumstances and defragging her mind.

She's moving. She's in a vehicle. She was traveling with Lev. Is she in the back of a pickup? No. Is she in the baggage compartment of a bus? No.

It's night. She's in the backseat of a car. Is Lev with her? No.

They weren't in a vehicle at the end, were they? They were walking. By a fence. Toward an old air force base. Is there more? There must be, but try as she might, she can't remember anything after walking toward the gate.

Although she knows it will makes her feel as if her brain wants to escape through her ears, she sits up. There's a thick glass barrier between her and the front seat. A police car? Yes—two Juvey-cops are in the front seat. This should be good news for her. It means that she's finally surfaced out of the underworld that Lev has dragged her through. It doesn't feel good at all, though, and it's more than just the tranqs. That she's in a squad car doesn't bode well for Lev, and she can no longer deny that she cares about what happens to him in spite of herself.

The Juvey-cop at the wheel glances in his rearview mirror, catching her gaze. "Well, look who's awake," he says pleasantly.

"Can you tell me what happened?" The sound of her own voice makes her head pound.

"Police action at the aircraft salvage yard," he says. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"No. I was tranq'd outside the gate." And then she adds, "I was out for a walk," which is a stupid thing to say, considering how isolated

that road is.

"We know who you are, Miracolina," the cop riding shotgun says. The news makes her have to lie back down on the sticky leather of the backseat, but she leans the wrong way and ends up slumped against the door.

"He told you?" she asks. She can't imagine Lev voluntarily giving her name to the Juvies.

"No one told us," he says, and holds up a small electronic device. "DNA tester. Standard issue for Juvey-cops since Happy Jack."

"I'd like to know what 'he' she's talking about," says the cop driving.

Well, if they don't know, she's not going to tell them. If Lev hasn't been caught, then he wasn't with her when she was. But would he just leave her? Lev is such a mixed bag of contradicting ethics, she can't be sure. But no—that's a lie—the kind of lie she used to tell herself just to demonize him. Deep down she knows he wouldn't leave her voluntarily. If he did, he had no choice. Still, there's no telling whether he's free or has been captured.

"What I want to know," asks the cop riding shotgun, "is how you wound up outside the gate and not inside like the rest of them."

Miracolina decides to tell them an edited version of the truth, since they're not going to believe it anyway. "I escaped from a parts pirate with a friend," she tells them. "We were looking for a place of safety."

The two cops look to each other. "So you had no idea that the airplane graveyard was an AWOL stronghold."

"We were just told to go there—that we would be safe from the parts pirates."

"Who told you?"

"Some guy," she says, which sounds like something any kid would say, and effectively throws a wet rag over the question.

"How did you get tranq'd?"

When she doesn't answer, the driver looks at his partner and says, "Prolly a trigger-happy rookie." His partner just shrugs.

"Well, you're here, and you're safe. Was your friend a tithe too?"

Miracolina has to suppress a smile. "Yes," she says, "he was." She's pleased she can lie to them in complete honesty, because after all it is the best policy.

"Well, no tithes turned themselves in," Shotgun says. "Perhaps he got hauled off with the rest."

"The rest?"

"Like we said, police action. Rounded up a huge nest of AWOLs. A few hundred at least."

Again, something that once would have been good news for Miracolina—justice prevailing, order restored—now brings her nothing but melancholy.

"Any bigwigs brought in?" she asks, knowing that if Lev or his friend, the Akron AWOL, were caught, it would be big news—they'd all know.

"No such thing as a bigwig AWOL, sweetie. They're all nonentities. Otherwise they wouldn't be where they are."

Again she sighs in relief, and the cops assume her sigh is exhaustion from the tranquilizers. "Lie back down, honey. You've got nothing to worry about. The parts pirates can't get you now." But she stays upright, not wanting to slip into a post-tranq stupor. There's something off about the way they're treating her. After all, she is an Unwind with a questionable story—and even though she's a tithe, she's never known Juvies to be so nice to kids about to be unwound. As they said, they see Unwinds as nonentities. You don't call nonentities "honey" and "sweetie."

As they pull into the local Juvey headquarters, she begins to wonder what the process is now. "I was supposed to go to Wood Hollow Harvest Camp," she tells them. "Will I still go there, or to a camp in Arizona?"

"Neither," the driver says.

"Excuse me?"

He parks the car and turns to her. "From what I understand, your parents never actually signed the unwind order."

That leaves Miracolina speechless.

They never signed it. Now she remembers them telling her that as she stood at the door—but she told them it was her choice to go, and she got into the van anyway.

"Even if you had made it to Wood Hollow, you would have just been sent home once they double-checked the paperwork. Can't unwind

without an order."

She laughs at the irony of it. All this time fighting to finally be tithed, and not only won't it happen, but it was never going to happen. She wants to be angry—but how can she fault her parents for loving her too much to let her go? She wonders how things would have been different if she had known. Would she still have taken the journey west with Lev after escaping from the parts pirate? Would she have stayed with him long enough to forgive him, granting him that absolution he so desperately needed?

To her amazement, the answer is no.

Had she known she'd never be tithed, that call she made to her parents wouldn't have just been a message that she was alive—it would have been a plea to come and get her. She would have let Lev finish his journey alone—solitary and unforgiven.

"I know how tithes are," says the shotgun cop sympathetically. "If it's what you really want, you can take it up with your parents when they get here."

And although it is what she wants, she's coming to terms with the disappointment of staying whole.

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you so much." But it's not them she's thanking.

Either things happen for a reason, or they happen for no reason at all. Either one's life is a thread in a glorious tapestry or humanity is just a hopelessly tangled knot. Miracolina has always believed in the tapestry, and now she feels blessed to have had a glimpse of its smallest corner. Now she knows her desire to be tithed was not there to leave her in a divided state—it was there to propel her into the right place at the right time to have a hand in the redemption of the boy who would blow himself up.

Who would have thought that the singular whole of her forgiveness was a more valuable gift than a hundred of her parts?

So she will return into the arms of her wildly emotional parents and will live the life they dream for her until she can find her own dream. She had no tithing party, but right now, she resolves that she will have herself a grand celebration someday. Perhaps a sweet sixteen. And she will find Lev, wherever in the world he is, ask him to attend, and

refuse to take no for an answer. And then, finally, she will dance with him.

OceanofPDF.com

81 · Hayden

To the best of Hayden's knowledge, they're the last ones left. There are fourteen others in the ComBom with him, all kids from the various communication shifts, who put more faith in him than in anyone else —which shocks Hayden. He had no idea there was anyone who looked up to him. One kid is noticeably absent. Before power was cut to the cameras, Hayden saw Jeevan getting into the Dreamliner with the other storks, his arms packed with pilfered weapons.

Connor had stopped responding in the middle of the battle, and the Juvies had, one by one, taken out the power generators, plunging the ComBom, and every other jet, into darkness.

By midnight it's over. Through the windows of the Com-Bom, Hayden can see the heavy transports, the battering ram, the riot trucks, and most of the Juvey squad cars pulling out: Mission accomplished.

Hayden thinks that maybe they've been forgotten—that they can sit it out for a few more hours, then make a break for freedom. But the Juvenile Authority is smarter than that.

"We know you're in there," they shout through a bullhorn. "Come out, and we promise no one will get hurt."

"What do we do?" the kids around him ask.

"Nothing," Hayden says. "We do nothing." Being that the ComBom was the communications center and brain of the Graveyard, it's one of the few crafts with all its outer doors in place and in working order. It's also one of the few crafts that can only be opened from the inside. When the battle began, Hayden had sealed the airtight hatch, leaving them as self-contained and cut off as a submarine. Their only defense is their isolation and a submachine gun Connor insisted that Hayden have. He doesn't even know how to fire the thing.

"You're in a hopeless situation," the Juvies yell through their bullhorn. "You'll only make matters worse for yourselves."

“What could be worse than all of us getting unwound?” Lizbeth asks.

Then Tad, who from the very beginning has been hanging close to Hayden as if they’re joined at the hip, says, “They won’t unwind you, Hayden. You’re seventeen.”

“Details, details,” Hayden says. “Don’t bother me with details.”

“They’ll storm us!” warns Nasim. “I’ve seen it on TV. They’ll blow off the door and gas us, and a SWAT team will drag us out!”

The others look nervously to Hayden to see what he’ll say. “The riot police have already left,” Hayden points out. “We’re not important enough to storm. We’re just cleanup. I’ll bet they just left the fat, stupid Juvies to wait for us.” And the kids laugh. He’s glad that they can still laugh.

Regardless of IQ and body mass, the Juvies aren’t going away. “All right,” they announce. “We can wait as long as you can.”

And they do.

At dawn they’re still there—just three squad cars and a small gray transport van. The media, which the cops held back through the raid, are now camped out just fifty yards away, their antennas and satellite dishes high.

Hayden and his holdout Whollies have spent the night dozing on and off. Now the sight of the media gives some of them a surreal sort of hope.

“If we go out there,” Tad says, “we’ll be on the news. Our parents will see us. Maybe they’ll do something.”

“Like what?” asks Lizbeth. “Sign a second unwind order? You only need one.”

At seven fifteen, the sun clears the mountains, heralding another scorcher, and the ComBom begins to roast. They manage to scrounge up a few water bottles, but not enough for fifteen kids who are already beginning to sweat out more than there is to take in. By eight o’clock, the temperature hits one hundred, and Hayden knows this can’t last. So he comes back to his favorite question, but this time it isn’t rhetorical.

“I want you all to listen to me and think about your answer to this,” he tells them. He waits until he’s sure he has all their attention, then

says:

"Would you rather die . . . or would you rather be unwound?"

They all look to one another. Some put their heads in their hands. Some sob dry tears because they're too dehydrated to cry. Hayden silently counts to twenty, asks the question again, then waits for the answers.

Esme, their best password-cracking hacker, is the first to break through the firewall of silence. "Die," she says. "No question."

And Nasim says, "Die."

And Lizbeth says, "Die."

And the answers start to come faster.

"Die."

"Die."

"Die."

Everyone answers, and not a single one of them chooses unwinding.

"Even if there is such a thing as 'living in a divided state,' " Esme says, "if we get unwound, the Juvies win. We can't let them win."

And so, as the temperature soars past 110 degrees, Hayden leans back against the bulkhead and does something he hasn't done since he was little. He says the Lord's Prayer. Funny how some things you never forget.

"Our father, who art in heaven . . ."

Tad and several others are quick to join in. "Hallowed be thy name . . ."

Nasim begins to recite an Islamic prayer, and Lizbeth covers her eyes, chanting the Shema in Hebrew. Death, as they say, doesn't just make all the world kin, it makes all religions one.

"Do you think they'll just let us die?" Tad asks. "Won't they try to save us?"

Hayden doesn't want to answer him, because he knows the answer is no. From the Juvies' point of view, if they die, all they lose are kids no one wanted anyway. All they lose are parts.

"With the news vans out there," suggests Lizbeth, "maybe our deaths will stand for something. People will remember that we chose death over unwinding."

"Maybe," Hayden says. "That's a good thought, Lizbeth. Hold on to it."

It's 115 degrees. 8:40 a.m. Hayden's finding it harder and harder to breathe, and he realizes the heat might not get them at all. It might be the lack of oxygen. He wonders which is lower on the list of bad ways to die.

"I don't feel so good," says a girl across from him. Hayden knew her name five minutes ago, but he can't think clearly enough to remember it. He knows it's only minutes now.

Beside him, Tad, his eyes half-open, begins babbling. Something about a vacation. Sandy beaches, swimming pools. "Daddy lost the passports and ooh, Mommy's gonna be mad." Hayden puts his arm around him and holds him like a little brother. "No passports . . . ," Tad says. "No passports . . . can't get back home."

"Don't even try, Tad," Hayden says. "Wherever you are, stay there; it sounds like the place to be."

Soon Hayden feels his eyesight starting to black out, and he goes places too. A house he lived in as a kid before his parents started fighting. Riding his bike up a jump ramp he can't handle and breaking his arm in the fall. *What were you thinking, son?* A fight his parents had over custody in the heat of their divorce. *You'll have him, all right! You'll have him over my dead body*, and Hayden just laughing and laughing, because it's his only defense against the prospect of his family collapsing around him. And then overhearing their decision to unwind him rather than allowing the other to have custody. Not so much a decision, but an impasse.

Fine!

Fine!

If that's the way you want it!

If that's the way YOU want it!

Don't put this on me!

They signed the unwind order just to spite each other, but laugh, laugh, laugh, Hayden, because if you ever stop laughing, it might just tear you apart worse than a Chop Shop.

Now he's far away, floating in the clouds, playing Scrabble with the Dalai Lama, but wouldn't you know it, all the tiles are in Tibetan.

Then for a moment his vision clears and he comes back to the here and now. He's lucid enough to realize he's in the ComBom where the temperature is too hot to imagine. He looks around him. The kids are awake, but barely. They slump in corners. They lie on the ground.

"You were talking about stuff," someone says weakly. "Keep talking, Hayden. We liked it."

Then Esme reaches over and touches Tad on the neck, feeling his pulse. His eyes are still half-open, but he's no longer babbling about tropical beaches.

"Tad's dead, Hayden."

Hayden closes his eyes. Once one goes, he knows the rest of them won't be far behind. He looks at the machine gun next to him. It's heavy. It's loaded. He doesn't even know if he can lift it anymore, but he does, and although he's never used it, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. There's a safety, easily removed. There's a trigger.

He looks at the suffering kids around him, wondering where "machine-gun fire" falls on the list of bad ways to die. Certainly a quick death is better than a slow one. He considers his options a moment more, then says, "I'm sorry, guys. I'm sorry I failed you . . . but I can't do this."

Then he turns the machine gun toward the cockpit and blasts out the windshield, flooding the ComBom with cool, fresh air.

OceanofPDF.com

82 · Connor

He wakes up in a comfortable bed, in a comfortable room, with a computer, a late-model TV, and sports posters all over the walls. He's groggy enough to think he actually might be in heaven, but nauseous enough to know he's not.

"I know you're pissed at me, Connor, but I had to do it."

He turns to see Lev sitting in the corner, in a chair that's painted with footballs and soccer balls and tennis balls to match the decor of the room.

"Where are we?"

"We're in Sunset Ridge Homes, model number three: the Bahaman."

"You brought me to a model home?"

"I figured we both deserved comfortable beds, at least for one night. It's a trick I learned from my days on the streets. Security patrols are looking for thieves, not squatters. They roll past but never go into model homes unless they see or hear something suspicious. So as long as you don't snore too loud, you're fine." Then he adds, "Of course, we've gotta be out by ten; that's when they open. I stayed too late at a model once and nearly scared a realtor to death."

Connor pulls himself to the edge of the bed. On TV is a news report. Aftermath and analysis of the AWOL raid at the airplane graveyard.

"It's been on the news since last night," Lev tells him. "Not enough to preempt the infomercials and stuff, but at least the Juvies aren't hiding it."

"Why would they hide it?" Connor says. "It's their stinking moment of glory."

On TV, a spokesperson for the Juvenile Authority announces that the count of AWOLs killed was thirty-three. The number brought in alive is 467. *"With so many, we'll have to divvy them out to various*

harvest camps," the man says, not even realizing the irony in using the word "divvy."

Connor closes his eyes, which makes them burn. Thirty-three dead, 467 caught. If Starkey got away with about a hundred fifty, that leaves maybe sixty-five who managed to escape on foot. Not nearly enough. "You shouldn't have taken me, Lev."

"Why? Would you rather be a trophy to go along with their collection of Unwinds? If they find out that the Akron AWOL is alive, they'll crucify you. Trust me, that's one thing I know about."

"The captain is supposed to go down with the ship."

"Unless the first mate knocks him out and throws him in a lifeboat."

Connor just glares at him.

"Fine," says Lev. "You wanna punch me?"

Connor chuckles at that and looks at his right arm. "Careful what you ask for, Lev—I pack quite a punch these days." Then he shows Lev the tattoo.

"Yeah, I noticed that. There must be a story there. I mean, you hated Roland, right? Why'd you get the same tattoo?"

Now Connor laughs out loud. Hard to imagine that Lev doesn't even know—but then, how could he? "Yeah, there's a story," he says. "Remind me to tell you about it someday."

Onscreen, they've cut live to the Graveyard, where "an unfolding drama" is taking place. One last batch of AWOLs has held off the Juvies by holing up inside an old World War II bomber.

"It's the ComBom! Hayden held them off all night!" For Connor it's almost like victory.

The ComBom hatch opens, and Hayden comes out, carrying a limp kid in his arms. He's followed by a bunch of other kids, none of them in good shape. The Juvies move in, and so do the media.

"We're witnessing the capture of the final AWOL Unwinds. . . ."

The reporters don't get close enough to stick microphones in Hayden's face, but they don't have to. In spite of the Juvies' attempt to spirit him into the transport van, he shouts loud enough for everyone to hear.

"We are not just AWOLs! We are not just parts! We are whole human beings—and history will look back on these times in shame!"

They shove him and the other kids into the van, but before they slam the door, Hayden shouts, *"To the new Teen Uprising!"*

Then the van carries them away.

"Way to go, Hayden," says Connor. "Way to go!"

The news briefly reports on the plane that got away, but as that's an embarrassment to the Juvies, not much is said. At first they had forced a plane to land in Dallas, thinking it was the AWOL Dreamliner, but it turned out to be a passenger flight from Mexico City. There have been unconfirmed reports of a plane going down in a California lake, but nothing further is said. Connor suspects the plane that went down is the Dreamliner—and as much as he'd like to see Starkey at the bottom of a lake, Connor hopes the storks survived the crash. That would be more AWOLs who got away from the Juvies.

Damn Starkey! He brought the Juvies down on them, then took half the weapons, hijacked their only means of escape, and left everyone else high and dry. And yet as much as Connor wants to blame it all on Starkey, he can't help but feel the brunt of the blame. He was the one who trusted Starkey to begin with, allowing him to amass power among the storks.

When it's clear that the news has moved on to other subjects—weather woes and celebrities behaving badly—Connor turns off the TV. "Nine thirty. Almost time to move on."

"Actually, there's one more thing I want to show you before we go." Lev goes to the room's computer and pulls up, of all things, a website for hot tubs.

"Uh . . . sorry, Lev, I'm not in the market for a Jacuzzi."

Lev is stymied for a moment, until Connor notices the mistake. "YouTube has an *e* at the end."

"Duh!" Lev types it over. "I was never good at keyboarding."

He tries again and this time gets it right. Lev clicks on a video, and Connor's heart just about stops. It's yet another news interview with Risa.

"I don't want to see it." Connor reaches to turn it off, but Lev grasps his wrist.

"Yes, you do."

And although the last thing Connor wants to see is another sales pitch for unwinding, he gives in, bracing himself for whatever he's about to see.

He can tell right away from the look on Risa's face that she has a single-minded determination she didn't have in the other interview he saw.

He watches in amazement as, in less than two minutes, she blasts Proactive Citizenry, the Juvies, and unwinding so completely there's no doubt which side she's on. The show's anchorman is left scrambling to pick up the pieces.

"They were blackmailing her!" Connor feels his eyes get moist. He knew there had to be an explanation, but he had become so jaded against everyone and everything, he was willing to believe that Risa had chosen to heal herself at everyone else's expense. Now he's ashamed of himself for thinking that.

"Proactive Citizenry has already released a statement denying it," Lev tells him. "They claim *she's* the one who used *them*."

"Yeah, right. Let's hope nobody's stupid enough to believe them."

"Some people are, some aren't."

Connor looks to Lev and smiles, realizing that getting tranq'd kind of put a damper on their reunion. "It's good to see you, Lev."

"Same here."

"What's with the hair?"

Lev shrugs. "It's a look."

They hear a car pulling up in the sales office parking lot. Time to go.

"So what do we do now? Lev asks. "I'm kind of AWOL from the Anti-Divisional Resistance. . . ."

"The ADR has become useless. If the best they can do is send AWOLs to a holding pen for the Juvies, then something's not working. Someone needs to rethink things."

"Why not you?" Lev suggests.

"Why not us?" Connor counters.

Lev considers it. "Well . . . you're a martyr and I'm a patron saint—I can't think of anyone better! So where do we start?"

It's a big question. Where do you begin to change the world? Connor thinks he may have the answer. "Have you ever heard of Janson Rheinschild?"

OceanofPDF.com

83 · Nelson

Even before he comes fully to his senses, he knows something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. He opens his eyes to scorching daylight. He's lying in a ditch. His body aches. One side of his face feels as if it's on fire.

He was tranq'd. Not just once, but repeatedly, and by his own damn gun! Enough sedatives to knock him out for maybe twelve hours. It's a wonder he hasn't been eaten alive by desert scavengers—but from the pain in his left leg, and bloody holes in his stolen uniform, clearly something tried. Nelson wonders how long he's been in the sun. Long enough for half his face to be swollen and throbbing from a second-degree sunburn.

He had him! He had Connor Lassiter, and now he has nothing but the tattered clothes on his back. It was the tithe! How could Nelson have been so careless! He should have killed Lev when he had the chance, but out of the kindness of his heart, he had let the boy live.

And here is the result of kindness.

The two will already be far from here, covering their tracks. His laptop held the codes of Lev's tracking nanites. Without his computer, they're useless. Nelson will not give up. He will find them. Tracking has always been his specialty, and this setback? It's nothing! It will only make him more determined, more ruthless in achieving his goal.

He climbs out of the ditch and marches, weak-legged, but strong-willed, like a zombie, toward Tucson. He will catch the Akron AWOL, deliver him to Divan, and be there to witness his unwinding—but the tithe will not meet such a merciful end. When Nelson finds Lev, he will visit upon the boy such wrath it will make the very ground tremble. Of this, Nelson can be sure. Just thinking about it fills him with enough joy and purpose to propel him down the long road to Tucson, and dark destinies beyond.

OceanofPDF.com

84 · Connor

"Flagstaff doesn't look much like south Arizona," says Lev. "Looks more like Denver or something."

"Denver doesn't look like Denver," Connor tells him. "I was there once. It doesn't have crazy mountain views like you'd think. The views here are better." After being so long in the south Arizona desert, Connor is thankful for the dramatic change in scenery. With white-capped mountains to the north and an abundance of pine trees, he knows they can't be too far from the town of Happy Jack and the dead harvest camp, but he tries not to think about that. The past is the past.

They've stopped at a diner on historic Route 66, and, bucking the paranoia that the past year has infused them with, they have dinner in full view of anyone who cares to notice them. No one does.

Their car is a nondescript beige Honda that Connor hot-wired back in Phoenix, after ditching the Ford he hot-wired in Tucson, after ditching Nelson's van. Anyone trying to track them would be hard-pressed to keep up with their transportation switcheroos.

The Rain Valley Diner boasts "the Best Burgers in the Southwest." Connor hasn't had food this good since before his parents signed his unwind order and his life turned upside down. As far as he's concerned, the Rain Valley Diner has the best burgers in the world.

With one hand he eats his burger, and with the other, he does some information gathering on Nelson's laptop, which the parts pirate was kind enough to leave for them in his van.

"Find out anything new?" Lev asks.

"It looks like Risa disappeared after the broadcast last night, and Proactive Citizenry wants her head. Not unwound, just her head. Like on a stake."

"Ew."

"And Hayden's being charged with everything they can charge him with."

"At least they can't unwind him."

"But they can unwind everyone else who got caught."

The thought of the captured Whollies brings Connor waves of anger, chased by sadness that threatens to wash him down into the lightless places within himself. "I should have been able to save them. . . ."

"Hey, you did everything you could—and besides, they're not unwound yet," Lev reminds him. "Maybe what we do now can still make a difference for them."

Connor closes the laptop. "Maybe . . . but what are we going to do now?"

They sit in a long, uncomfortable silence, doing nothing but eating, because that's easier than answering the question. No plans, no destination, no idea what direction to go from here other than "away." Connor's first instinct is to find Risa, but he knows that, like himself, she'll be completely off radar. He wouldn't even know where to start looking.

"I could take you to the Cavenaugh mansion," Lev suggests. "You'd be safe there."

"Safe would be nice for once, but that's not happening. Besides, didn't you bail from there?"

"Yeah, well, if I come back with the one and only Akron AWOL, I think they'll forgive me."

"Keep your voice down!" Connor looks around—they've chosen a corner booth that's relatively secluded, but it's not that big of a diner, and voices carry.

"Maybe we oughta check out that 'You-Tub' place, get a Jacuzzi, and turn into a couple of spa potatoes. We deserve some downtime."

He knows Lev is kidding, but there's something about what he said that triggers a thought. It's a small thought at first, but it grows quickly. An inkling becomes a hunch, becomes an idea, becomes a revelation, and Connor flips open the laptop again, clicking and typing furiously.

"What is it?" Lev asks.

"Janson Rheinschild!"

"But you already told me he was wiped out of digital existence, so what's the point in looking?"

Connor continues to ply the search engines, getting the keyboard slick with french fry grease. "You gave me an idea."

"Me?"

"The hot tub website. The typo."

"Are you gonna make fun of my keyboarding skills again?"

"No. You gotta have skills to make fun of them," Connor tells him. "Anyway, Hayden figured there's a code-eating worm on the net that chewed up every reference to Janson Rheinschild, but it's only looking for his name spelled correctly. . . . So I'm inputting every possible misspelling of his name."

Lev smiles. "Leave it to you to turn someone else's screwup into gold."

Connor orders a second burger and spends twenty minutes misspelling the name. By the last bite of the burger, he's ready to give up hope . . . then suddenly there's a glint of that gold Lev was talking about, and it turns out to be the mother lode.

"Lev—take a look at this!"

Lev comes around to his side of the booth, and they look at a news article dated more than thirty years ago. The article is from a small local paper somewhere in Montana where Rheinschild once lived. Apparently they kept tabs on one of their favorite sons, but consistently misspelled his name as "Reignchild."

Connor and Lev read the article in stunned disbelief. Rheinschild, a research scientist and inventor, was important enough to make quite a name for himself, until that name got erased like a shunned pharaoh from an Egyptian obelisk.

"My God!" Connor says, "This guy pioneered neural bonding and regeneration—the very technology that made unwinding possible! Without Rheinschild, transplants and grafting would be back in the Stone Age!"

"So he was the monster who started this!"

"No, this was right at the beginning of the war—before anyone even thought of unwinding."

Connor plays a video embedded in the article, and they watch an interview with Rheinschild, a middle-aged man with glasses and thinning hair—two clear signs that it was before unwinding.

"We can't even begin to know the uses of this technology," Rheinschild says with an excitement much more youthful than he looks. *"Imagine a world where loved ones who die young don't really die —because every part of them can be donated to ease someone else's suffering. It's one thing to be an organ donor, and another to know that every single part of you will save someone else's life. That's a world I want to live in."*

Connor shivers, for the first time noticing the air-conditioned chill of the diner. The world Rheinschild described is a world Connor would want to live in too . . . but that's not the world they ended up with.

"Of course there are going to be ethical questions," Rheinschild goes on to say, *"which is why I've started an organization to study the ethical issues inherent in this sort of medical advancement. Proactive Citizenry, as I'm calling it, will be a watchdog to make sure there are no abuses of this technology. A conscience to make sure nothing goes wrong."*

Connor stops the video, trying to process it all. "Holy crap! So he founded Proactive Citizenry to protect the world from what he created!"

"And it became the very monster he was afraid of."

Connor thinks back to something he learned in school. Oppenheimer—the man who created the first nuclear bomb—turned against it in the end and became the bomb's greatest opponent. What if Rheinschild was the same, speaking out against unwinding, then was silenced—or worse—was silenced before he even had the chance to speak out. Not even the Admiral remembered the man, which means Rheinschild was either already gone or was prevented from speaking out against the Unwind Accord.

Lev reaches over and starts the video again—just a few more seconds of Rheinschild joyfully, naively waxing on about the glorious future he envisioned. *"This is just the beginning. If we're able to regenerate nerve tissue, we can regenerate anything—it's just a matter of time."*

The interview freezes on his smiling face, and Connor can't help but feel tremendous sorrow for this man; the secret father of

unwinding, who paved a road to a place beyond hell with his good intentions.

"That's pretty wild," says Lev, "but how can knowing all this stop unwinding? Isn't that what you said, that finding out about this guy can change life as we know it, or something like that? Even if everyone knew about him, it wouldn't change a thing."

Connor shakes his head in frustration. "There's got to be something we're missing."

He scrolls down to the end of the article, where there's a picture of Rheinschild and his wife in a laboratory—apparently they worked as a team. When Connor reads the caption beneath the photo, his stomach seizes so suddenly, he thinks he might lose both of his Best in the Southwest burgers.

"It couldn't be. . . ."

"What is it?"

Connor can't speak for a moment. He looks at the caption again. "His wife. Her name is Sonia!"

Lev doesn't get it—and why should he? He was never in that first safe house with Connor and Risa. Sonia was the name of the old woman who ran it. Over the years she must have rescued hundreds, maybe thousands, of AWOL Unwinds. Connor enlarges the picture on the screen, and the more he looks at Mrs. Rheinschild, the more certain he is.

It's the same Sonia!

What was it she said to him? *We move in and out of darkness and light all of our lives. Right now, I'm pleased to be in the light.* Connor had no idea the burden of darkness she must have been carrying all these years.

"I know that woman," he tells Lev. "And now I know where we have to go. We're going back to Ohio."

Lev grows pale at the suggestion. "Ohio?" The thought of home brings a scorpion's nest of emotions neither one of them are ready for, but Sonia's antique shop is in Akron. If there's more to this picture, she's the only one who can give it to them.

Bells above the diner's front door jingle, and a stone-faced deputy saunters in, his eyes immediately scanning the room. While Connor

and Lev were absorbed by the news article, two patrol cars had pulled up out front, and officers are all over the stolen Honda.

"You look like a deer in headlights," Connor whispers to Lev. "Stop it."

"I can't help it." Lev lowers his head so his hair hangs over his face, but that looks just as conspicuous as antelope eyes.

Sure enough, the deputy zeroes in on them and makes a beeline across the diner—but to Connor's surprise, their waitress gets to the table first and says, "Tommy, you just about inhaled those burgers! You keep eating like that and you'll burst out of your jeans."

Connor is a little slack-jawed as the deputy arrives, but Lev pulls out of road-kill mode and says, "Yeah, Tommy, you're such a pig. You'll get fat, just like your dad."

"It's in the genes," says the waitress, not missing a beat. "Better be careful!"

The deputy turns to the waitress. "You know these boys, Karla?"

"Yeah, this is my nephew, Tommy, and his friend Evan."

"Ethan," says Lev. "You always get my name wrong."

"Well at least I knew it started with an *E*."

Connor nods politely to the deputy and looks at the waitress. "Your burgers are just too good, Aunt Karla. So if I get fat, it's your fault."

Satisfied, the deputy turns to Karla, concluding that Connor and Lev are somebody else's problem. "Know anything about that car out there?" he asks her.

Karla looks out the window and says, "A couple of kids pulled up, maybe an hour ago. Boy and a girl. I noticed them because they looked to be in a hurry."

"They come in?"

"No, they just ran off."

"I'm not surprised—the car was stolen down in Phoenix."

"Joyriders?"

"Maybe. Could be AWOLs. A bunch of them escaped from that old air force base in Tucson." He jots her statement down in his notepad. "You remember anything else, you be sure to let us know."

Once the deputy is gone, Karla winks at Connor and Lev.

"Well, Tommy and Ethan, your meal's on the house today."

"Thank you," Connor says. "For everything."

She winks at him. "Least I can do for my favorite nephew." Then she reaches into her pocket and, to his amazement, puts a set of car keys in front of Connor, rabbit's foot key chain and all. "Why don't you do me a favor and drive my car 'home' for me today. It's out back."

Lev looks at Connor, astonished, which isn't much different from his deer-in-headlights look. For a moment Connor thinks she might recognize who they are, but he realizes this is not about recognition. It's about the random kindness of a stranger.

"I can't take these keys," Connor whispers.

Karla lowers her voice to match his. "Yes, you can. And anyway, you'd be doing me a favor taking that clunker off my hands. Even better—why don't you total it when you're through? 'Cause I could use the insurance money."

Connor takes the keys from the table. He doesn't even know how to say thank you for something like this. It's been a very long time since anyone has gone so far out of their way to help him.

"You need to know that not everyone's your enemy," Karla says. "Things are changing out there. *People* are changing. It might not be all that obvious, but it's there, and I see it every day. Why, just last week a trucker came in and was bragging all about how last year he picked up that Akron AWOL kid at a rest stop and gave him a ride. Poor guy got arrested for it too, but still he was bragging, because he knew it was the right thing to do."

Connor suppresses a smile. He knows the exact trucker she's talking about. Josias Aldridge, with the grafted card-trick arm. Connor has to clench his jaw to keep himself from telling her all about it.

"There's ordinary people out there doing extraordinary things." Then she winks at them again. "And now you've given me the chance to be one of those extraordinary/ordinary people, so I should be the one thanking *you*."

Connor rubs the rabbit's foot between his fingers, hoping that his own luck has finally changed. "It's too suspicious if you don't report it as stolen."

"I will," Karla says. "Eventually." Then she stands up and starts stacking their empty plates. "I'm telling you, change is on the way," she

says. “It’s like a plump old peach, ripe and ready to drop.” Then she offers them both a warm smile before going back to waiting tables. “You take care now.”

Connor and Lev take a few moments to collect their thoughts. Then they head out and around back to find a classic red Charger with some fender damage. Not exactly a show car, but no clunker, either. They get in, Connor starts it, and it purrs like a waking lion. The car smells of rose air freshener, and there are middle-aged-woman accessories everywhere, but that’s okay. Connor doesn’t mind being reminded of ordinary/extraordinary Karla.

As they pull out onto the road, Lev looks over at Connor. “Ohio?” Lev says. “Does it really have to be Ohio?”

Connor grins at him. “Yes, it does. And when we get there, the first thing I’m gonna do is make you get a haircut.”

Then they pull onto Route 66, heading east into a world that’s ripe for saving.

OceanofPDF.com

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

is the author of many critically acclaimed novels for young adults, including the Skinjacker Trilogy, *Unwind*, and *Downsiders*. He also writes screenplays for motion pictures and television shows. The father of four children, Neal lives in southern California. Visit him at storyman.com.

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR
Simon & Schuster, New York

Cover design by Chloe Foglia,
based on original design by Krista Vossen
Cover photograph copyright © 2012 by Thinkstock.com

Watch videos, get extras, and read exclusives at

TEEN.SIMONANDSCHUSTER.COM

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Neal Shusterman

Antsy Does Time
Bruiser
The Dark Side of Nowhere
Dissidents
Downsiders
The Eyes of Kid Midas
Full Tilt
The Schwa Was Here
The Shadow Club
The Shadow Club Rising
Speeding Bullet
Unwind
UnStrung
What Daddy Did

THE SKINJACKER TRILOGY

Everlost
Everwild
Everfound

THE STAR SHARDS CHRONICLES

Scorpion Shards
Thief of Souls
Shattered Sky

THE DARK FUSION SERIES

Dread Locks
Red Rider's Hood
Duckling Ugly

STORY COLLECTIONS

Darkness Creeping
MindQuakes
MindStorms
MindBenders

Visit the author at storyman.com and facebook.com/nealshusterman

OceanofPDF.com

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Neal Shusterman

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Black market organ statistics courtesy of www.havocscope.com

"Belgian Surgeons Harvest Organs After Euthanasia" by Michael Cook, © BioEdge Web Journal, May 14, 2010

"Hoodies, Louts, Scum: How Media Demonises Teenagers" by Richard Garner, © *The Independent*, March 13, 2009

"34 Children Abandoned Under Nebraska's Safe-Haven Law" by Nate Jenkins, © The Associated Press, November 14, 2008

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Book design by Hilary Zarycky based on a design by Al Cetta

The text for this book is set in Fairfield.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Shusterman, Neal. UnWholly / Neal Shusterman. p. cm. Sequel to: Unwind.

Summary: Thanks to Connor, Lev, and Risa, and their high-profile revolt at Happy Jack Harvest Camp, people can no longer turn a blind eye to unwinding. Ridding society of troublesome teens and, in the same stroke, providing much-needed tissues for transplant might be convenient, but its morality has finally been brought into question. However, unwinding has become big business, and there are powerful political and corporate interests that want to see it not only continue, but expand, allowing the unwinding of prisoners and the impoverished. Cam is a teen who does not exist. He is made entirely out of the parts of other unwinds. Cam, a 21st century Frankenstein, struggles with a search for identity and meaning, as well as the concept of his own soul, if indeed a rewound being can have one. When a sadistic bounty hunter who takes "trophies" from the unwinds he captures starts to pursue Connor, Risa and Lev, Cam finds his fate inextricably bound with theirs.

ISBN 978-1-4424-2366-4 (hardback)
ISBN 978-1-4424-2368-8 (eBook)

[1. Fugitives from justice—Fiction. 2. Survival—Fiction. 3. Revolutionaries—Fiction. 4. Identity—Fiction. 5. Science fiction.] I. Title. PZ7.S55987Uv 2012 [Fic]—dc23 2012002729

FIRST EDITION

OceanofPDF.com